carry on

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carry on

by foolondahill17

Summary

God is dead. Sammy finally has what he always wanted. The kid is alive again and trying to figure out the whole human schtick. Cas – Cas is complicated, like always. And Dean is barreling headfirst into a mental breakdown. It's the end of the road so far, and the future never looked so frightening.

"I can't," Dean stammers into Cas's chest. "With you – I can't." And Cas goes very still, stops rubbing his hand up and down Dean's back. But I want to. Please, Cas, don't leave me. Because I want to.

"Dean," Cas says, still not moving. "I can tell you're praying to me, but I can't hear you. I'm sorry."

An alternate ending to the series, focusing a lot on *feelings* and *mental health* and *processing trauma* – because, you know, what's better than that?

Notes

I just really want my bbs to be happy, okay? So, here's them trying to be happy. Emphasis on trying. But I promise they do get there. Eventually. But between now and then, there's a whole lot of work to be done.

Warning: This story is going to deal with some hard truths about mental health and trauma, primarily Dean's alcoholism and unaddressed PTSD – because I see Dean's psyche as one big balancing act: he staves off his trauma with booze, but he stifles his alcoholism with hunting, so if any of those pillars go away, Dean topples.

Specific warnings apply for self-injury, self-medicating, alcoholism, suicidality, hospitalization, past parental abuse and neglect, sexual trauma, internalized homophobia, depictions of mental illness, and stigmatization of mental illness (including

potentially offensive language).

The end goal of this is Destiel, but it's going to take a long time for Dean to be comfortable with that. I want to stress the warning for sexual trauma, because I'll be delving into Dean's past traumatic sexual experiences with both women and men. Not all of Dean's reactions toward this trauma and toward Cas will be ideal because he represses his emotions and acts out when he's hurting (wot???), and those habits don't break easy. But Cas is patient with him, so I hope you all will be, too.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Three months ago

Purgatory is hot and wet. It smells like rot: like decaying leaves and undergrowth and bodies. And Dean doesn't want to die there.

Dean chokes on blood. Agony rips through his stomach, radiating through his chest. His abdominal muscles constrict around the open gash torn in his stomach, and a spasm rocks through his shoulders. His hand grapples against the wound across his belly, and he can feel warm, slippery blood, something bulbous and wrong under his fingers that might be an internal organ.

"C-Cas," Dean gulps through the blood in his mouth. It spills down his chin. All he can taste is rust. The world swims around him: gray light, skeletal tree branches, and Cas's worried, pained face.

"Don't speak," Cas says, voice clipped. He sounds angry. And Dean doesn't blame him. Cas has a right to be angry with Dean because Dean, after all, is a huge jerk. A total douchewad.

"Mmh –" Dean tries to say, but liquid fills his throat. He coughs, sputters; he can't get enough air into his lungs. And he doesn't want to die here. He doesn't want to die in Cas's lap. He doesn't want to die when Sammy is – and Sammy won't know – And he sure as fuck doesn't want the last thing echoing in his ears to be Rowena's smug voice: *Then one day you die. You go to Hell. And you can't make it right. So fix it.*

“M sorry,” Dean rasps.

“I said,” Cas says fiercely, wincing his eyes shut in concentration. “Shut. Up.”

OOO

Present Day

Dean wakes to an orange glow behind his eyelids that warns him, dear God, not to open his eyes. His head pounds: a line of pain from his ears down his jaw, splintering bone. He groans, or tries too; his esophagus is too dry to allow any kind of noise up his throat. His mouth is stuffed with cotton, or at least feels like it. And Dean remembers every time some goon gagged him with a dirty rag shoved between his lips.

Holy shit, he thinks and lies absolutely still, not wanting to rouse the fiery pain that waits in the rest of his body or tempt the nausea he can feel sitting wet and heavy in the base of his stomach.

He can’t remember exactly how much he drank last night, but he can smell sour whiskey on his clothes, and he knows that *too much* is probably the right answer to that question. That’s when Dean thinks *dammit, Sammy* like this is in any way his little brother’s fault.

Dean lets his arm fall limply to the bed beside him and he blindly grabs for a pillow, finds one and drags it over his face, dousing the sunlight that’s bleeding through his closed eyelids.

No nightmares, he reflects. No nightmares if he’s blacked-out drunk, and that’s an advantage if he’s ever heard one, even if he has to deal with a bitch of a hangover in the morning.

Then he thinks: *sunlight?* But he can’t bring himself to crack open his eyes to examine where he is. But it definitely can’t be the bunker. There aren’t any windows to let in natural light, and, besides, this place doesn’t smell like the distinct greasy food, booze, and gun smoke odor of Dean’s bedroom.

But Dean also seems to be alone in the bed, which means either he was not drunk enough or too drunk to go home with someone last night.

Dean hears a door creak open, senses the shadow of another person entering the room, and Dean knows he should be a lot more alarmed

than he is: his body should tense, he should be reaching for some kind of weapon.

But, instead, he's too preoccupied with trying not to throw up.

"You still breathing, dude?" says Sam's voice, and Dean feels too sick to be properly relieved.

"No," Dean grunts, and, holy crap, his vocal cords must have been put through a damn meatgrinder.

Sam snorts in that unique Sam way that's sort of a laugh but also sort of pissed off: Dean'd know his brother's bitchy voice anywhere.

"It's almost noon," Sam says.

"Fuck off," Dean groans. He shifts, wanting to turn onto his side, but bile leaps into his throat and, *son of a bitch,* Dean thinks numbly. He rolls out of bed, and stumbles for the door. "Bathroom?"

Sam evidently senses Dean's distress, because he backs out of his way and points, "Cross the hall."

Dean makes it to the bathroom in time to vomit last night's whiskey spectacularly into the toilet. Besides the booze, his stomach is mostly empty. He hasn't eaten since…he can't remember. And he mostly ends up dry heaving on his knees, head aching and sweat jumping to his hairline.

Dean hears Sam's heavy tread as he shuffles after him into the bathroom, then just hovers awkwardly over his shoulder. Sam tugs a few tissues loose from the box sitting on the toilet tank. He offers them to Dean, and Dean weakly accepts them to wipe his mouth.

Dean braces his elbows on his thighs and lets his head drop into his hands. His body feels heavy and unwieldy. He can't imagine the effort it will take to actually get up off the floor.

"What'd I get hit with?" Dean croaks.

"Jim and Jack, Dean, what else?" Sam sighs. And, yeah, his brother is definitely pissed off. Shit.

Dean doesn't answer. He doesn't have the patience to deal with Sam's crap right now. Instead, Dean tentatively lifts his head. He scans the bathroom; something about it feels familiar, but he can't place it. His

eyes skate past his brother, arms crossed and frowning, leaning against the sink, to land on the blue and green shower curtain, the gray towels, the bar of soap in an actual dish on the sink, and a painting of a bunch of lily pads. It all feels strangely and unnervingly domestic.

“Where are we?” Dean asks.

Sam looks at Dean, and his frown turns more concerned than disapproving. “You don’t remember?”

“The fuck m’I asking for?” Dean grunts, but looks away, immediately and alarmingly self-conscious, because clearly he’s supposed to remember. There’s a disturbing blank spot inside Dean’s head where last night should belong. He thinks he can vaguely recall yesterday morning: an insistent, unsettled feeling in his chest that chased him out of the bunker and – and what? To the nearest bar, clearly. But then what? And why?

Or does he not need a reason these days?

He scrubs his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to dig out the grit stuck in his eyelashes. His teeth are fuzzy. He can smell himself, and it makes him want to puke again.

“You’re at the apartment,” Sam says after a pause. “You know – Eileen and –”

“Fuck,” Dean cuts him off. “Fuck, yeah. ‘Course. Duh.” And he does recognize it, now. The apartment slots itself back into his brain: he remembers helping Sammy and Eileen move in two weeks ago, lugging cardboard boxes and cheap Walmart furniture up the flight of stairs to their second-story flat, ribbing Sammy about the patterned bedspread, matching salt and pepper shakers, and fancy-ass coffeemaker in an effort to suppress the spreading ache inside his chest that felt a lot like fear and a little like jealousy. And, the hell? Because what did Dean have to be jealous of, anyway?

Dean hoists himself back to his feet, groaning as dizziness and pain washes over him like a damn tidal wave, wincing past the pulse of agony in his head that comes from the change in altitude. Sammy makes a move to help him, but Dean shoves him away and grabs the lip of the sink, instead, when his knees threaten to buckle beneath him, floor tilting from a combination of too much booze and too little food.

Sam takes a step back, still frowning at Dean, and Dean wishes his little brother would just leave him the hell *alone* because Dean is *fine*. Just hungover. And it's not like this is Dean's first rodeo.

"Cas was worried," says Sam.

Dean grunts. *Cas* sends off all kinds of warning bells inside Dean's head: things he doesn't want to look at too hard right now. Instead, he gets a good look at himself in the mirror as he braces his hands on either side of the basin: his hair is disheveled, greasy, and overly long. He's got four days' worth of patchy stubble on his chin. There are dark shadows under his eyes, which are sunken and bloodshot. He looks like death warmed over.

"He didn't know where you were," says Sam.

"Says you left without telling him you were heading out," says Sam.

"Seemed to think it was because of something he –"

"Jesus, Sam," Dean interrupts. "Can you let me breathe?"

Dean's heart beats too fast against his ribs. His lungs don't pull in enough air. He's lightheaded in a way that he doesn't think is connected to the hangover. He feels – he feels like he's missed a step while running down stairs, like he's stumbling, free-falling. Fuck. He pulls both hands into fists, digs his nails into his palms in an attempt to keep himself grounded.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean sees Sam shrug. "I just think you should call him. Try to work out…whatever needs to be worked out." *You just got him back, man,* Sam seems to be saying, and, shit, Sammy has no fucking clue.

"It's none of your Goddamn business," Dean growls, throat so tight he almost can't get the words out, but the aggression helps. A little. Helps him feel less like he's teetering on the edge of a cliff.

Dean can practically hear his brother roll his eyes. "Whatever, man. You should shower. You reek."

Dean shoves his middle finger up so he can save his breath. Sam moves toward the door. "Towels are under the sink. There's coffee when you're ready."

Then Sammy leaves. The door clicks shut behind him, and Dean wilts.

He shuts his eyes and breathes through his nose until he's reasonable sure he's not going to be sick again. His hands are shaking – just a steady, fine tremor that won't let up, even when he concentrates on stilling them. It's like something inside his blood is vibrating.

Dean swallows hard. He tastes acid, so he opens the cabinet behind the mirror and looks for a spare toothbrush. There's a stupid double toothbrush holder, His and Hers or some shit, and a handful of body creams and makeup products.

It all feels so alien. So irrefutably not-Sam, that Dean can't wrap his mind around it. And suddenly Dean's back in that cramped campus apartment, picture frames on bookshelves made of plywood and cinderblocks, bicycle crammed in the corner, weird-ass modern art and plants. The fucking too-tight Smurfs t-shirt.

Dean shoves the thoughts aside. He can't find another toothbrush, so he grabs one from the holder and hopes it's Sam's. He brushes his teeth, then he strips and gingerly climbs into the shower. He turns the water hot and just stands under the stream for a minute, braced against the slick wall, reminding himself to breathe.

There are a dozen fancy hair and bodywash products in the shower, and Dean bets about eleven of them belong to Sam. He scrubs himself down with a bar of soap. He thinks about the effort it would take to jerk himself off. How fucking tired he is. How his dick is just…there. Just fucking there, like it always is nowadays, and he thinks about how he woke up yesterday, harder than he's been in a while, rolled into the warmth of the body next to him, and –

Son of a *bitch*.

Dean really wants to hit something, but he doubts Sammy or Eileen will be thrilled if he puts his fist through their new bathroom wall. So, instead, he shuts off the water and gets out of the tub. He finds the towels where Sam said they'd be, and he rubs his skin until it stings. He really doesn't want to get dressed in his dirty clothes again, but he's sure as hell not asking Sam if he can borrow an extra shirt.

Dean grits his teeth and pulls his jeans and t-shirt back on. He leaves the gross-smelling flannel. Then he thinks about shaving, but his hands are still trembling, which is annoying and a little unnerving, so he decides not to.

Sam's in the kitchen at the end of the hall. So is Eileen. Shit. Dean really doesn't want an audience right now. The two of them are

silently signing to each other, having a conversation Dean can't be a part of and that he feels uneasily probably has to do with him.

Sam turns at the sound of Dean shuffling into the room. Eileen looks over, as well, and shoots him one of her million-dollar smiles. All teeth. Eyes crinkled at the corners. But she looks genuinely glad to see him, unlike Sam, if not for the concern that hangs around her eyes.

"Hi, Dean," she says. "Did you sleep well?"

Dean lifts a hand in a weak wave, "Hola," he says, and doesn't bother answering the question. "Coffee?"

Sam rolls his eyes again. He pushes a steaming mug across the counter. "Here," he grunts, and nothing else. Dread sinks into Dean's stomach, and he has a feeling he's in for the silent treatment. He still doesn't remember what he might have done that was so terrible.

"Do you need anything to eat?" Eileen asks. "I can make eggs."

The thought of food makes Dean's stomach squirm, and he raises his hand, shakes his head. "I'm good. Thanks." He crosses the room, takes his mug, and swallows a slug of coffee, which burns his mouth but manages to settle a bit of his nausea.

Sam and Eileen look at him. Dean can feel their eyes: heavy and concerned from Eileen, irritated from Sammy. Dean doesn't need this shit, so he turns around, braces his back against the counter, and stares at the rest of the apartment.

It's a small place, sparsely furnished, because even though apartments are cheap in bumfuck Kansas, Sam and Eileen still have to pinch pennies until the two of them find sustainable, civilian jobs.

But Eileen has a good eye. The room is simply decorated, but it looks comfortable and soothing, all cool colors and soft edges. Homey. Which, shit, yeah, the bunker's never been exactly inviting – with its concrete walls and sharp angles – and it probably could have used a few more comforts, like the filmy curtains framing the window and the throw pillows and fuzzy blanket on the couch.

We – Eileen's done hunting, Sam said three weeks ago. Like somehow whatever Eileen wanted was constitutional, or some shit. And then they left. And Dean helped them move out while he tried not to think about Stanford or what-was-her-name-Amelia or all the other times Sam left. How many worst nights of your life can you have, Dean

wondered, before you just get sick of worst nights?

I just – can't do this anymore, Dean, Sam said when Dean didn't reply. For a second it looked like Sammy's face would crumble, but he collected himself with a deep breath and a furious blink. Dean didn't want him to do that: close himself off like that. Dean wanted his little brother to fall apart, to cry, to stumble into Dean's arms. Dean could cradle him like he used to when Sammy was a little boy and worried about Dad not coming home, afraid of the shadows and bumps in the night. *I'll protect you, Sammy.*

We just…need some. I want this to work.

There wasn't anything Dean could do to help Sam, now. Dean wasn't what Sam needed anymore.

Okay, said Dean, trying to keep his voice measured. He could barely hear himself through the blood pulsing in his ears. *Okay, Sammy.*

We can't – the bunker, said Sam helplessly. *We we we.* It meant Sam and Eileen now, when it used to mean Sammy and Dean, and – fuck, Dean should be happy for his little brother for finally getting what he always wanted.

I know, said Dean. He couldn't feel his lips. Couldn't feel his fingers. Couldn't think.

And the – the motel rooms we spent half our lives inside? I feel like it's strangling me, Dean.

I know, said Dean again, because what Sam meant to say was it's you. I feel like you're strangling me, Dean.

I just need a break, Sam said. We've talked for so long about what happens when it's all over. And – I want to try that out, for once. Get my bearings with Eileen. Try to level out or something.

Okay, Sammy, Dean said.

And you – Sam started. You've still got Cas and Jack. And it's not like Eileen and I will be far. And I still want to finish digitally cataloging the bunker's library.

Yeah, said Dean, and it must have been one too many times, because suddenly Sam looked scared.

I'm not leaving, Dean, he said. *I promise. You –*

Sammy, Dean stopped him. Managed to put enough finality into his voice that the worry cleared from Sam's face. *It's okay. I'm okay. Really. I get it.*

Sam released a breath. *Yeah?* Sam said.

Dean shook his head, smiled even though it hurt his lips. *Getting real sick of hearing you two fuck through the walls, anyway.*

Sam rolled his eyes. *Jerk.*

And Dean almost forgot he was supposed to say *bitch* back. Sammy was already heading out the door, said he'd go pick up some grub.

Bitch, Dean said as the door swung shut, and sank onto his bed.

"Your car is still at the bar," Sam tells Dean, tugging him back to the present. Dean knows he's being kicked out. *Your car* rankles, and Dean doesn't know why, because the Impala's always been Dean's car, but Sammy's always shared in that, somehow. And now it feels like Sammy's just casting them off: Baby and Dean both.

"Okay," Dean answers.

"Great," says Sam. He tosses back the rest of his own coffee. "I'll be back in a sec."

Dean concentrates on drinking his coffee. He stares at the stupid granite countertop. Thinks about the stupid walnut cabinets.

"Dean?" Eileen says, and Dean knows it'll be impolite not to look up, so he does, and he wishes he didn't, because she's looking at him with so much concern it's like he must be literally bleeding out of his pores, or something.

"Are you alright?" she says slowly and carefully, like she wants to make absolute sure he understands her.

Maybe it's just the fact that Eileen is kind, that her face is soft and open, or maybe it's the fact that Dean's always felt more comfortable getting all sharing-and-caring with women rather than men, but for whatever reason, Dean suddenly desperate wants to tell her: *no. fucking no.* He doesn't know what's wrong with him, but he's definitely not alright. And he thinks maybe – maybe

But the words crowd inside his throat all at once, until he can barely breathe, let alone speak. So Dean forces a smile, and, because he's a shit, stupid person and he hasn't got around to learning sign language yet, he signs one of the only words he knows: makes a fist at shoulder-height and bobs it in an imitation of a head nod. *Yes*.

Eileen's probably gotten really good at reading people's faces over the years, and Dean's expression clearly doesn't fool her, because she's still frowning.

"You ready to head out?" Sam walks back into the kitchen.

"Yeah, sure," Dean tears away from Eileen's gaze. He leaves his coffee, half-empty, on the counter and pushes off. He stops off at the guest room for his shoes, which he knows Sam must have taken off after he dragged Dean's drunk ass in here at some point in the night. Dean still can't remember, and probably never will, which is becoming a more common occurrence lately. The not remembering thing.

Snippets gnaw at the back of his head: he remembers yelling at Cas, heart lodged in his throat, leaving Cas, fleeing the bunker, driving… somewhere. He pulled off at some point and downed a couple beers. Then he thought about heading to Sammy's. He distinctly remembers deciding against heading to Sammy's, for obvious reasons. Then he thought about driving up to Jody's, seeing if she had wind of any cases. Then he ended up at the bar. He was already drunk, but he doesn't remember how he got the rest of the alcohol. That's when things peter out into a slur of hazy images and snatches of conversation, a barely cogent argument with the bartender about surrendering his keys and reluctantly giving up Sam's name when the bartender asked if there was someone he could call.

Sam's already waiting in the car by the time Dean comes back into the kitchen. Eileen steps forward and hugs him, which is – fine. It feels nice to at least be on someone's good list.

"Sam is just worried about you," she says when she pulls back from her hug. "He's not really angry."

Dean musters up a weak smile. "Yeah? Thanks for letting me crash." He signs a *thank you*, and Eileen seems to understand that Dean isn't interested in any heart-to-hearts right now, because she backs up, signs something that might be a *you're welcome* or *it's fine*.

Sam certainly seems angry when Dean climbs into the passenger side of his car. His brother stares straight ahead, barely grunts to

acknowledge Dean's presence. Then he starts the car and pulls out of the apartment complex's parking lot.

The apartment is only about twenty-minutes from the bunker, situated in Lebanon's neighboring town, Esbon, but Sam heads in the opposite direction, heading East on Route 36, and Dean's too much of a coward to ask how far of a drive they're in for.

Dean can feel it: a tacky, thundering silence that hangs between him and Sam. It sinks into Dean's gut and stays there. A stillness that burrows into Dean's body and makes him want to tear his skin off.

It feels like the air that coats the bunker, now. The static electric force that's been building ever since Chuck and Amara and – the sickly emptiness of it all. Just the three of them – Dean, Jack, and Cas – after Sam and Eileen left. Team Free Will 3.0 doesn't make a whole lot of sense anymore.

As much as the constant buzz of activity had grated on Dean's nerves when the apocalypse hunters had bunked there – the multiple sets of footsteps ringing through the halls, the constant chatter, the bodies invading Dean's home – Dean had gotten used to the momentum.

Now the air is crowded with silence and echoes of what used to be; memories of everyone they lost startle Dean around every corner. The walls are drenched in the blood of self-sacrificial martyrs and Dean's sick of it.

He keeps waiting for the *calm before the storm* to break into a Goddamn *storm*, but it doesn't. And somewhere inside of his belly, Dean knows it never will. And somehow, even if Dean hates himself for admitting it, the endless calm is a helluva lot worse than the storm ever was. Their lives have been plagued by plenty of open-ended questions, but maybe none worse than the massive, terrifying *what now* that hangs over their heads like some kind of hangman's noose.

The silence keeps up until Sam finally pulls off at a dingy roadhouse where the Impala waits, shiny and beautiful as ever, and Dean lets out a breath of relief, happy that she's, at least, still something he can take care of.

Sam pulls the car into the parking lot. He shuts off the engine. He doesn't say anything.

Screw this.

Dean thinks about throwing open the door and leaving without another word, but Sammy's silence reminds Dean too much of Dad, when Dad would get angry at something Dean had done wrong, but instead of coming right out and saying it, Dad would just sit there like a stone, miles and miles dragging beneath the Impala's wheels, and Dean hated that shit.

"The hell's eating you, man?" Dean demands.

Sam finally looks at Dean. His eyes are narrowed, lips are pursed. "You really don't know?" he says, like some kinda sanctimonious bastard.

"Yeah, well," says Dean, moving toward the door handle. "Fuck you, too."

"*This*, Dean!" Sam blurts out and Dean stops. "Just – all of this! Shit. This is the – the fifth time you've turned up blackout drunk inside a month, man."

"Screw you, Sammy," Dean says. "I didn't ask for your help."

"No," Sam says viciously, shaking his head. "You're right. You didn't. The damn bartender had to call me because you refused to hand over your keys."

Dean's throat is dry. He's not quick enough on the draw, and apparently Sammy thinks that's some kind of permission slip.

"Cas says the nightmares are getting worse. You're barely eating. You've clearly lost weight. A lot of weight. You look like crap. And you think I haven't noticed the shaking hands? Cas says your memory's blown to hell, you keep spacing –"

"*Cas says*?" Dean spits out, tasting poison. "What the fuck does Cas have to do with this?" But a cold vice closes around his heart and clenches. He wants to get out of the fucking car. He wants to get out now, but he thinks maybe Sam will put him into a headlock if he tries to move.

"He's your best friend, Dean!" Sam yells. "And I'm your brother. We're *worried* about you? Can't you get that into your thick skull?"

"I'm *fine*!" Dean spits. "Fucking fine."

"You're not fine!" Sam says. His hands are balled into fists. He looks

like he wants to hit something. Dean has the sneaking suspicion that something is him.

“Then what is this?” Dean shoots back. His hands are shaking harder now, and he digs his right fist into his left hand, squeezes tight, because he doesn’t want Sammy to see. *You think I haven’t noticed the shaking hands? Your memory’s blown to hell.* “Some kind of damn intervention?”

“Dean – shit.” Sammy’s breathing is wet. Shit. Fucking shit. Because Dean knows that sound. Sure enough, his little brother’s eyes swim with tears when he looks at Dean. “Man,” he takes a breath. He sounds like he’s pleading. “If you just tried to pull back the drinking _”

Fuck this. Dean is out of the car before he registers moving.

And he’s drowning. Michael’s hand stuffs Dean’s head under water. Dean tries to hold his breath, but his lips explode open and he sucks in lungful’s and lungful’s of water. It fills his throat. Suffocates him. Takes like blood. And smells like blood. And fuck. He wakes up with an unfamiliar presence in the bed behind him, smells musty thrift store flannel, feels a stubbly chin nuzzle against the back of his neck. *“Dean.” “Cas.” Chapped lips and warm tongue and –*

Dean hears a car door open. He hears Sam’s shoes grind on the gravel parking lot.

He needs a drink, Dean thinks urgently, just a quick swallow to make his head stop spinning, but there’s no way in hell he can head into the bar without Sam freaking out. There’s a half-bottle of Beam in the backseat of the Impala. If he can just hold out for a second longer until Sam leaves.

“Are you going back to the bunker?” Sam asks. His voice is painfully gentle.

“I don’t – fuck. Maybe,” says Dean.

“You should call Cas,” says Sam.

“Give me my damn keys, Sam,” says Dean.

“Where are you going?”

“None of your fucking business, give me the keys!”

For a split-second Dean is sure he's going to hit his brother. Sam must see him tense, because Dean sees his brother's infinitesimal responses, drilled into his muscle-memory after years of training: the slight step back to find more level footing, the half-raise of his left shoulder into a blocking position.

Dean drops his shoulders. Sam relaxes. But his eyes are dark when they scan Dean's face.

Without a word, Sam digs the keys out of his pocket and tosses them to Dean. Dean catches them. His fingers feel numb, but he catches them.

"Whatever, man," Sam says. He turns his back, walks back around his car. Dean expects Sam to pause for some kind of platitude: a *be safe, watch out for yourself,* or *call me when you get there.* But there's nothing.

Sam opens the driver's door and slides behind the wheel. He turns the engine over and then drives out of the parking lot.

Dean watches his brother drive away. There's something in his chest that wants to climb out. It's hard and pointy, makes his esophagus bleed as he tries to swallow it back. It doesn't go away until Dean opens the Impala's trunk and roots around in the emergency duffle. He finds his bottle of whiskey and climbs behind the wheel. The shaking in his hands finally still around the familiar curve of the bottle. Then he takes a couple swallows, lets the alcohol eat the acid in his throat, burn away the tears that prickle in the corners of his eyes.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

36 hours before

Cas technically shouldn't require sleep, but lately he finds that to be the exception rather than the rule. He supposes it's only natural, to be tired. Escaping the Empty with Jack, surviving the final battle between the Nephilim and the two celestial siblings – it had all required a great deal of strength. It's natural, perhaps, that Cas's Grace should be significantly depleted.

Still.

Even though Cas has had three months, as Dean would say, to recharge.

Cas is beginning to think that his Grace will never return. That, perhaps, at last he's truly Fallen. And then he wonders, is it even possible to be an Angel of the Lord when there is no longer a Lord to be an Angel of?

Cas sits at the kitchen table, idly stirring his tea. His eyes are heavy. He should be in bed. And Cas wonders why he's so worried. When long ago Cas stopped serving Heaven in favor of serving humanity. But it's impossible not to worry: about his Grace. About Jack. About Sam and Eileen. About Dean.

Mostly about Dean.

And it's impossible not to be tired. Grace aside, Cas is exhausted. He's tired of keeping an eye on the phones. Tired of keeping up with the bunker's daily requirements – the laundry, cleaning, and cooking when Cas has no clue how to properly do any of the three. Tired of keeping up with Jack and his constantly shifting moods – because apparently being fully human now means he has some catching up to do with teenage hormones.

At least Sam and Eileen help, when they can. And occasionally Dean, when Dean decides to come out of his room.

Which isn't fair. Because Dean still cooks – at odd and inconvenient

times of the day, like seven in the morning or midnight. But he usually makes enough to last several meals and at least it's things Jack will eat: piles of grilled-cheese sandwiches, gigantic pots of stew, heaping pans of baked macaroni, and bacon. A lot of bacon. Funny, Cas sees Dean make the food, but he doesn't see him actually ingest any of it.

It's just the everyday type things Dean doesn't do: grocery shopping, or helping Jack improve his driving, or doing anything, really, with Jack. And a part of Cas is becoming more and more certain that Dean simply can't stand the sight of the boy – that every time he sees him, he can't help but see the soulless man who killed his mother, who nearly killed Sam when he destroyed Chuck.

And Cas can't exactly blame Dean. He tries to understand. He does. The problem is, for Castiel, Jack has always only ever been Jack. Kelly's son. The boy she entrusted to Cas's care. The soul that reached out to Cas when it was still in utero.

Cas has wondered, sometimes, whether it might be better if he and Jack find somewhere else to live. But every time Cas thinks about it, his stomach twists, because he can't fathom the idea of leaving Dean.

But he can't imagine giving up Jack, either.

So, Cas should be sleeping, but he doesn't want to. Instead he sits in the bunker's kitchen drinking tea – Sam's that he forgot to bring with him to his new apartment. It's bitter, but soothing. Cas likes it with a squirt of Dean's honey. And when he's not sitting and drinking tea, he is, as Dean would say, *prowling*.

Cas never understood Dean's uneasiness about Cas watching him while he slept. It's simply that Cas likes looking out for them – all of them. He feels safer when he can protect them. Helpless when he can't.

Cas likes to wander the bunker's halls at night, listening to their breathing within their rooms, keeping a lookout for anything that might disturb their slumber. But Dean calls it stalking and growled something about *not a damn watchdog*, as if he'd been mortally offended on Castiel's behalf.

But it's not, Cas thinks, a habit he will easily give up: worrying for his friends. His family.

Cas feels a tug of disquiet deep within his core, something disembodied that he knows isn't his. Cas described it once as a

Profound Bond, and he's still not certain why Sam and Dean balked at the idea. Nonetheless, Castiel is bonded to Dean Winchester in a way that can't be broken – he became fused to Dean's soul when he knitted him back together in Hell. Even with Cas's depleted Grace, with the fact that he doesn't think he can any longer hear other people's prayers, he will always be connected to Dean. *I always come when you call.*

Cas has clearer access to Dean at night, when sleep deconstructs Dean's mental walls and leaves him vulnerable. Cas feels guilty, sometimes, having this open channel to Dean's mind, muddy as the waters might be, because he knows how sensitive Dean is to infiltration, how poignantly he feels the betrayal of privacy.

But Cas can't help it. Just as he can't help but know that Dean is currently gripped in the throes of a nightmare. The nightmares have been getting worse lately: Cas knows because he's sensed the growing intensity of Dean's emotions during the night, the increased length and frequency of the dreams, the deep shadows under Dean's eyes when he wakes, fixes a smile on his face, and pretends all is well.

Cas had hoped the bad dreams would lessen in force after – well – after their lives drifted into some semblance of calm.

Cas has spoken with Sam about his concerns. He told Sam about Dean's nightmares, about his drinking, his listlessness, his disengagement. Sam wondered tentatively, and Cas could hear the pain in his voice, but also the frustration and worry, that perhaps his leaving with Eileen had set Dean off. But Cas didn't think so. Sam didn't abandon Dean, and, deep down, Dean knows it. Sam's only twenty-minutes away. He and Eileen still frequent the bunker to keep up with their digital archiving project and stay nearly every other night for dinner.

And Sam said that Dean's been in dark places before – Cas *knows* this. Cas has witnessed many of these dark places, himself – but Dean always manages to pull himself out of it. But what Cas doesn't understand is why *now?* Why when God is dead, Heaven and Hell no longer concerns? Why when, for the first time in so many years, Dean is finally given opportunity to rest does he appear to be crumbling?

Cas understands that the human psyche is a complicated thing, that even Dean doesn't understand what is happening to him. And Cas knows this frightens Dean – this *not knowing* ¬– the lack of control. Cas knows Dean's hurt is self-destructive, that he's wary of burdening

others with his pain. No matter what Cas has told him, how many times he's told Dean that to care for him is not a burden, but a privilege, Dean doesn't accept it.

Cas's stomach clenches against Dean's rising panic. Cas leaves his tea on the table and walks down the hallway until he stands outside Dean's bedroom door. He listens carefully, but he hears no disturbance other than Dean's rustling blankets. As a rule of thumb, Cas knows, Sam and Dean don't disturb each other from nightmares. Both brothers are uneasy sleepers; it's better to let them get what little rest they can.

Sam is so much better at this, Cas can't help but think. Some small part of him wishes Sam and Eileen hadn't moved out so soon. Even though two months isn't too soon, not when they'd clearly been aching for privacy for much longer.

But Dean –

Cas doesn't know how to help Dean, and Sam is so much better at knowing how to handle his brother, so much better at being patient, at waiting out Dean's gruff silences, at knowing when to push, at evading his explosive anger when someone digs too deep too fast. Castiel is so clumsy, so ill-suited to this task, and Cas knows – with a bone-deep, shattering knowledge – that Dean would so much rather his brother be here, instead of Cas.

Dean's voice rises from behind the door, a muffled groan. "Sammy, please – please no."

Cas can't discern what Dean's dreaming about: whether he is reliving some nightmarish reality or merely dreaming in generalities, a bundle of anxieties manifesting themselves in distorted images and disturbing memories.

Cas's heart aches, and he wishes he – he wants.

Yearns in a way he knows is entirely human. Entirely selfish. Because it's not fair of Dean, to ask for more from him, to ask that he open his heart in a way Cas knows –

Dean yells out, voice a mixture of fear and pain, and Cas opens the bedroom door without a second thought.

In the darkness, Cas can make out Dean writhing on his bed; he's kicked his covers off, and he's still asleep when he shouts, "Sam!

Sammy, please –”

And Cas has seen Sam do this multiple times, but he’s never done it itself: race to Dean’s bedside and shake him awake, dodge the frightened, sleep-confused blow that will come after, and then ease his brother back against the mattress.

Cas doesn’t know what to do. Dean continues to writhe, groaning, limbs flailing.

“Dean,” Cas tries, not sure where to grab him that would cause Dean the least amount of distress. “Dean, wake up. You’re having a nightmare.”

“Sam – Sam! Cas, help him –”

Cas’s gut twists. His hand lands on Dean’s shoulder and he shakes him. “Wake up, Dean. Dean!”

Dean’s eyes snap open – his pupils are blown wide with terror and his body moves in pure reflex: his hand shoots out to wrap painfully around Cas’s wrist. His other arm dives under his pillow, where he keeps his gun.

“It’s me,” Cas says quickly, trying to keep his voice low. “It’s me, Dean. You’re safe.”

Dean’s eyes latch onto Cas’s. His throat bobs as recognition softens his face. He falls against his pillow. His hand drops. But he continues to breathe too-hard, breath snagging in his throat. His forehead drips with sweat. He’s shaking.

“Sh-shit, Cas,” Dean says. He leaves his gun under his pillow. Instead, he brings his hand up to wipe his face. “You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Cas frowns. “You were having a nightmare.”

Dean doesn’t reply. He blinks at the ceiling. Now that Dean has stopped yelling, the bunker seems unnervingly silent. Cas listens for any sounds of stirring from Jack’s room across the hall, but it’s silent; Jack, Cas thinks, could probably sleep through an apocalypse.

Dean swallows several times. He seems to be having trouble catching his breath. Cas realizes his hand is still on Dean’s shoulder, and he can feel Dean’s muscles strain as he pulls in each breath. He doesn’t know

whether he should remove his hand; Dean hasn't mentioned it. Dean hasn't noticed it yet.

A few more moments, Cas decides – he can leave his hand where it is for a few more moments.

"Are you in pain?" Cas asks, noting Dean's pinched brow, the whiteness of his lips.

"I –" Dean pauses to clear his throat. He digs his knuckles into his eyes. Cas knows he's just become aware of the tear tracks running down his cheeks, and Cas pretends he doesn't notice. "Fuck. No. I'm fine."

"You're breathing too quickly," Cas says. "You could hyperventilate."

Dean huffs something that might be a laugh, but it gets caught in his throat. His chest stutters as he tries to suck in more air. Dean shuts his eyes tightly. He's pale. His chin trembles. Cas tightens his grip on Dean's shoulder; he feels terribly, overwhelming inadequate.

"I'm here, Dean," Cas says, softly, trying to remember how Sam does this. What Sam says. What Sam offers. "You're safe."

"F-fuck this," Dean says weakly. His breathing is still too shallow. "Fuck. Cas, I –" Dean stops. He licks his lips. His eyes are still closed.

There is something childlike about Dean in the middle of the night. Something open and gaping, like a raw wound. A vulnerability he falls into only by virtue of exhaustion. Cas can feel the hum of adrenaline in Dean's body. He can feel him trembling.

"You're cold," Cas decides. He lets go of Dean's shoulder reluctantly. He gathers the heap of blankets that landed at the foot of Dean's bed and shakes them out. He lays the top sheet and blanket over Dean's body. Dean's fists close around the edge of the blanket and he curls in on himself, turning onto his side, bringing his knees up toward his chest. He looks small.

Maybe Dean is embarrassed now. Cas wants to tell him that he shouldn't be. That nightmares are nothing to be ashamed about. That needing help –

"Stop freaking *hovering*, man. I ain't dying," Dean grunts. And Cas knows this is how Dean gets when he's hurting and doesn't want people to know. He gets aggressive when he's trying to protect

himself. Cas has finally realized, that when Dean tells him to leave, he doesn't really want him to go.

So, Cas sits on the edge of Dean's bed. Dean looks away, but doesn't protest.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Cas whispers to the back of Dean's head. Dean's hair is growing long. Dean hasn't been taking care of himself. He's been holed up in his room, watching television and eating bad food. Dean's room smells like whiskey.

It's just how Dean copes, Sam said, when Cas called him. *He'll come out of it. I promise. He always does*. But then Sam promised he'd drop by that night; the five of them would play cards and eat pizza, teach Jack how to cheat at poker. And Dean's smile was too wide. His jokes exceptionally rowdy and inappropriate. He drank until he could barely stand.

And before Sam left with Eileen, he took Cas's elbow and said, *Maybe I should stick around. You know –*

No, Sam, Cas said, stupidly. *I'll watch over him.*

Yeah, Sam swallowed. *Just, ah, call me if you need anything, 'kay, man?*

Cas wonders if he should call Sam tomorrow, tell him about another bad night in a string of bad nights. But Sam deserves rest. Cas can handle this.

"No," Dean says. There's a long pause. Cas hears Dean swallow. "Just –"

Dean stops. Cas wonders what he was going to say: *Just leave me alone.*

But maybe it was *just stay*. But that, Cas thinks, is what human's call wishful thinking.

"It's all…" Dean whispers. "It's all so fucking much, Cas."

Cas desperately wants to reach out and hold Dean's shoulder again, but he doesn't think Dean will take kindly to touch, right now. Touch has always been something Dean's treated with caution. Cas has watched him, shrugging away from closeness, hesitating before stepping into a hug, but also at times seemingly desperate for it: hanging on too long, fisting his hands in the back of Sam's shirt, teetering on the edge of asking to be touched but not knowing

whether or not he deserves it.

“I’m so sick of this shit,” Dean says. There is a low register of anger in Dean’s voice, but mostly he sounds unbearably exhausted.

“I wish I could help,” Cas says.

“It’s okay, Cas,” Dean sighs. “I’m okay.”

This is a lie. Cas knows it’s a lie. Cas frowns, uncertain whether he should call Dean out on it, or not, wondering what Sam would choose. Humans lie when they want something very badly, Dean explained once. But what does Dean want?

Dean settles deeper under his covers. His breathing has finally leveled out. With luck, he will be asleep again in a few minutes. Cas settles against the headboard, because there’s no reason he shouldn’t be comfortable while he waits. And Dean hasn’t asked him to leave, which isn’t exactly an invitation to stay, but with Dean, it’s maybe the closest Cas will get.

At some point during the night, Cas blinks himself awake to find he’s slid down the headboard. His neck aches from the unnatural position. Dean is whimpering in his sleep again, stirring fitfully, so Cas turns on his side, makes sure he’s not pressed up against Dean’s back, but close enough to put his hand on Dean’s arm, close enough to smell him: old deodorant, sweat, and alcohol.

Cas rubs small, slow circles onto Dean’s arm with his thumb. He doesn’t have Grace enough to send Dean back to easy sleep, but he can wait for Dean to quiet before shutting his eyes again, before slipping into calm, heavy darkness.

OOO

They’ve shifted during the night. It’s the first thing Castiel notices when his eyes open, and he freezes.

He’s curled close to Dean, body pressed against his back. Cas’s face is nuzzled into Dean’s neck. The prickly hairs at the base of Dean’s head scratch Cas’s cheek. Cas’s arm is slung around Dean’s body, hand resting on Dean’s chest, and Cas can feel Dean’s heartbeat, slow and steady through his palm.

Dean is thin. Cas can feel Dean’s ribs under the blankets. He’s lost weight. He hasn’t been eating.

Cas's mouth is dry. It's difficult to breathe, because every time he breathes, he just breathes Dean: the smell of him, the feel of him. Cas's stomach inflates and presses against the ridge of Dean's spin. And Cas doesn't know what to do. He knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that it's not a good thing if Dean wakes up to this. Cas – Cas doesn't know how he allowed himself to get so close.

This

This was not what Cas intended. This is not fair to Dean, because Dean doesn't know that Castiel is there, and he certainly did not agree to sharing his bed.

Even as he knows this, Cas can't help the guilty tug of yearning inside his chest. Because Dean feels so good like this: wrapped in Cas's arms, safe and warm against his body. It's so much easier to look after Dean if Cas can hold him.

Cas swallows back the shameful stab of regret as he lifts his arm away from Dean's side. He moves slowly, carefully, so he won't disturb Dean's sleep.

But then Dean shifts. Cas feels the change in Dean's breathing as he wakes. Cas holds his breath, levers himself up minutely on his arm so he can roll away quickly if Dean reacts violently.

Dean murmurs something sleepily. His muscles strain. He rolls onto his belly. The he turns toward Cas. He crooks his left leg, loops Cas's legs under his. He is very close. He presses his forehead to Cas's jaw. The greasy tips of Dean's hair tickles Cas's nose.

This is not fair, Cas thinks, panicked. It's not fair of Cas to take advantage of Dean's lack of awareness like this. Cas has to leave, even if moving means waking Dean up.

"Dean," Cas says, trying to extricate his legs from where they're pinned below Dean's. "I have to…."

Dean murmurs something again, and this time Cas feels sure Dean says, "Cas," and hums a small sound of contentment.

Cas's heart beats urgently. "Dean, I must –"

Dean lifts his face. His eyes are open. He catches Castiel's gaze. Brilliantly green eyes. Beautiful. Cas can see every freckle sprinkling his pale skin. *As the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the*

seashore.

Cas's voice hitches. "Dean," he protests weakly.

"Cas," says Dean, and tilts his head. He takes Cas's bottom lip between both his own.

Dean's breath is hot. His lips are dry. His tongue is wet when it slips from between his lips and runs along the edge of Cas's bottom lip, and Cas shivers.

He is acutely, unbearable, shamefully aware of his erection. And he can feel Dean's, even through the layers of sweatpants and blankets: a bulge sticking into Cas's upper thigh.

Cas understands human sexuality in only a most rudimentary sense. At first his penis had simply annoyed him; just one more human inconvenience that he had to deal with, to learn to hide when he got an erection without his control, to, later, learn how to masturbate in a way that did not irritate his sensitive flesh and brought him some semblance of relief. He's only had sex the one disastrous time, with April, or the reaper who used her body. Emmanuel never slept with Daphne, which was…odd for a married couple, but Emmanuel had been completely uninterested in that side of things, and Daphne had been very sweet. Very understanding. Toward the end of their self-imposed exile, he had often slept with Kelly, to give her ready comfort from bad dreams and painful cramps, and although they had *cuddled*, they had never been intimate. Other than that, Cas's only knowledge comes from the glimpses of porn he's caught on Dean's laptop.

Cas doesn't know what he's supposed to do. Cas is fairly sure Dean knows what's happening right now, but – Cas doesn't know what to do. He – he stopped denying long ago that this is what he wants.

The first and only time he acknowledged it out loud was to Charlie, at some point during their stay in that horrible warehouse, in between playing referee between Rowena and Charlie, all three of them so strung out, so desperately exhausted trying to find a solution to the Mark of Caine, so achingly worried about Dean, and Charlie said gently:

He'll come around, Cas, I promise.

And somehow Cas had known she wasn't talking about the Mark. Cas's face flushed uncomfortably warm. He wasn't aware that angels could blush.

What? Charlie said, eyes sparkling with mischief, and she grinned, although she looked tired and a little sad. *You think I can't tell? I got a fancy-schmancy radar for those things, man. And, let me tell you, you and Dean? Broadcasting loud and clear.*

But Dean doesn't know. Cas feels sure that Dean doesn't know, because Cas has been careful not to let him see. Sam – perhaps Sam has guessed. But Dean –

And Cas has waited so long, refused to let himself hope for so long – because Dean is a human, and Cas is an angel, and Dean has only ever referred to Cas as his best friend, as good as a brother, family. None of those things allow space for waking up wrapped in each other's arms, or pressing their lips together, or –

But Cas can't help it: he drops his face and latches onto Dean's top lip, nudges Dean's mouth open so he can slip his tongue out, bumps the tip against Dean's teeth, and –

With a wet, stuttering gasp like he's just emerged from cold water, Dean breaks away. He sits up so abruptly he almost slips off the bed. His eyes are wide, panicked.

"Fuck," he gasps. "Holy fuck, Cas –"

"Dean?" Cas says uncertainly. His heart drops into his stomach. He feels cold. He lifts himself onto his elbow, reaches out toward Dean.

"Fuck," Dean says again. He twists out of Cas's reach and leaps out of bed. He stands with his back to Cas, shoulders tensed around his ears. He's holding both his arms across his body, so tightly Cas thinks he'd need a crowbar to prize them apart.

"Dean, I –"

"Fuck this," Dean cuts him off. He takes four long strides toward the door, throws it open into the hall, and stalks out of sight.

Cas listens to Dean's footsteps as they fade down the hallway. Regret thunders through Cas's body, turns his stomach, and makes his blood feel like acid. It's difficult to swallow. He's painfully aware that he's still hard.

He feels dirty and wrong. He feels like he did when he first found out that April had been possessed when they had – and April hadn't wanted to have sex with Castiel, but still, Castiel had sex with her.

And, somewhere behind the reaper's carefully manufactured smile and precise movements, April must have been begging the homeless, bizarre stranger to stop touching her.

Because even though Dean had kissed Cas first, even though Cas had thought Dean knew what was happening, Dean had clearly not wanted it. And Cas had – despite that, Cas had –

Cas feels ill. He extracts himself from Dean's bed and pads across the room. He shuts the door firmly behind him. When he turns a corner, he nearly runs into Jack.

Jack's hair is sleep-tousled. He's holding a bowl of Crunch Cookie Crunch in one hand and a mug of coffee in his other, because he swiftly discovered that caffeine was, if not a suitable replacement for the added awareness Grace can provide, at least a passable imitation.

"Dean's in a bad mood," Jack announces. "What happened?"

"Yes, he, ah," Cas sputters, but there is no possible way he could begin to explain to Jack what happened. "He just needs some space."

Jack still looks puzzled, but he accepts Cas's answer with a shrug and continues on his way back to his room.

Cas picks up his speed down the hallway and reaches the kitchen at a run.

"Dean –" he barges through the door. Dean turns to meet him. His eyes are bloodshot. He has a bottle of whiskey in his hand. He looks angry. But behind that Cas can see the fear, the pain.

Cas did this. Cas hurt Dean.

"Dean, I'm sorry," Cas blurts out. "I –"

"Fuck, Cas," Dean says. "Nothing fucking happened, okay? I was – and you were – and nothing fucking happened, so can we just forget about it? Just. Shit." He takes a long draw of whiskey, right from the bottle, pulls away with a gasp and then wipes his mouth with his arm.

"I –" Castiel's head spins. There are too many thoughts, and it's difficult to form words. "Yes, Dean. If that's the way you prefer –"

"Yeah?" Dean says. He slams the whiskey bottle onto the metal counter. "Well, it fucking is. Okay?"

“Of course,” Cas answers. Then Dean shrugs past him in the doorway, walking fast, refusing to meet his gaze.

Cas stands there for a long time, listening as Dean’s bedroom door slams shut, then hearing it open again. Listening to Dean’s footsteps as he bypasses the kitchen and heads toward the exit. Cas can barely hear the sound of Dean’s heavy foots clomp up the stairs. And the then bunker’s front door shuts, and Dean is gone.

OOO

Three months before

Michael leaves the Men of Letters’ bunker as soon as Dean and Castiel disappear through the portal. The bunker is not warded against angels, so Michael has free rein there. This is, perhaps, unwise. Yet Michael can’t exactly fault the Winchesters for it; after all, Michael no longer finds it strange for an angel to be best friends with a human.

It’s important that he return before their twelve hours is up, but, without the archangel cuffs, it’s certainly not necessary to simply sit around with, as Adam would say, a thumb up his ass.

Additionally, Michael is not stupid. He knows that it took the combined weight of his own, Lucifer’s, Gabriel’s, Raphael’s, and God’s powers to bind the Darkness. It will take more than Michael and Castiel’s combined Grace to get the binding spell off the ground.

Besides, there is something wrong with Castiel’s Grace. Michael can sense it.

And there is also something wrong with Michael’s Grace. This is something he wants to keep to himself, for now. He doesn’t know whether it’s a result of being in the Cage for so long, or whether it’s the same thing affecting Castiel. Either way, there is no way the archangel cuffs should have bound Michael’s powers so well for so long; there is something wrong.

But there isn’t time to process this information. Just like there isn’t time to process everything else: the anger, the hurt, the monstrous betrayal that Castiel revealed to Michael when he showed him everything God has done while Michael was in the Cage.

Michael has things to do. Dean mentioned that the bunker has its own stores, but Michael prefers working with fresh ingredients. First, he travels to Ethiopia for unrefined myrrh resin, then to southern China

for *cinnamomum cassia,* and to the Mediterranean Basin for rockrose. Then he returns to the bunker. He can't deny that it feels exceptionally good to stretch his wings.

Michael prepares his ingredients in the kitchen. Binding God will be difficult, but it is also their only chance of victory – if what Michael suspects is true, and they hope to save Sam Winchester's life.

He thinks that the wound God and Sam Winchester share binds them in more ways than one. It keeps God from leaving this world. Just as it keeps either of them both from dying. Or either from living, should the other be killed.

And it's not like Michael really cares whether Sam Winchester survives – Lucifer's true and perfect vessel – but Adam does. Michael doesn't quite understand why Adam cares, seeing as his half-brothers both left him to rot in the Cage for years. But Michael has long ago decided he won't ever truly understand the complex emotions of human beings – he need only trust them.

Michael checks a clock and finds that his ministrations took no longer than fifteen minutes. He still has several hours left to wait, and, there is, he supposes, no point in delaying the inevitable any longer.

So, he flies to a nearby empty field – there is no use destroying the Winchester home if his guest decides to be less than happy to see him.

Then Michael kneels in the high, dry grass, bows his head and shuts his eyes. "Amara," he prays. "I need your help."

Michael immediately senses the change of energy that means he is no longer alone in the field. He peers carefully from under his lashes to see Amara standing several feet away from him. She looks imperious, as always, despite her remarkably human garb: her hair is in a loose tale at the nape of her neck. She is wearing a tight, colorful, and stretchy material on her legs, which, Adam helpfully provides, are called yoga pants.

"This better be good, nephew," she sighs, rolling her eyes. "I left Pilates for you."

Chapter End Notes

> When Cas looks at Dean's freckles he thinks of this Bible verse: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore"

Genesis 22:17 ESV.

I just wanted to make sure that people understood that Cas's anxiety about what happened between him and Dean is born out of his own insecurities; I don't believe Cas did anything "wrong" in that situation (just like Cas 100% did not rape April, but she and he were both, in fact, raped by the reaper who possessed April). Learning to navigate intimacy with people who struggle with sexual trauma, identity issues, etc. is very hard. Guilt is often involved, even if it's unfounded.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Every time I dive into Dean's headspace, I'm overwhelmed by the sheer volume of trauma this kid's lived through. Again, please be mindful of my content warnings and tags (check the end note for more specific warnings that include spoilers). As my therapist says, be gentle with yourselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months ago

"I have to admit," Chuck says with a smile. He's leaning against one of the pillars holding up the parking garage ceiling, arms crossed over his chest. "Eileen, I'd counted on you. But, Sam, you are a bonus."

Sam lifts his machete, even though he knows the weapon is ridiculously inadequate. Fear pulses in his stomach and he immediately moves so he can keep Eileen in his line of sight. "What the hell do you want?" he demands.

Chuck doesn't answer. He nods from Eileen to Sam. "So, you two a thing now, or what?"

"Shut up," Sam says. His voice is tight. Because it's one thing to have Dean tease him about it, but quite another to have Chuck using it like a blade to their necks.

Sam can feel Eileen's eyes on the back of his head. She's waiting for him to make the first move.

"You've got me," Sam says quickly. "You don't need her."

"Sam, Sam, Sam," Chuck shakes his head, still with that horrible, soft smile. "You know, I'm not a bad guy. This doesn't have to end with your pretty girlfriend losing her head. How 'bout we strike a deal?"

"How 'bout you go to hell?" Eileen snaps.

"Feisty," Chuck says, nodding approvingly. "I like that. So, here's what I'll do – one time offer. You and your brother drop whatever it is you're planning, and I'll leave you and Miss Congeniality here free to build a white-picket fence and make lots of babies. Maybe I'll even

throw in a few more perks."

Then Chuck snaps his fingers. Eileen gasps, drops her machete with a clatter, claps her hands over her ears, and starts screaming.

Eileen is on her knees and Sam is by her side in a second, clutching helplessly at her arms.

"Stop it!" Sam yells. "You bastard, stop it!"

"Oh, whoops," Chuck says. "Guess I overcorrected there. Hearing everything at once is worse than hearing nothing at all, isn't it?" then he snaps his fingers again. Eileen's screams cut off with a whimper. She takes her hands away from her ears, and Sam sees thin lines of blood running down the sides of her head.

She lifts her face and, despite the whiteness of her skin and the beads of sweat at her hairline, she looks fierce. "Fuck you," she spits at Chuck.

Chuck laughs. "I can make it happen all over again." He raises his hand again, fingers poised to snap.

"No –" Sam says at once. Eileen's hand closes around Sam's wrist. She's trying to tell him without words not to do anything stupid; Sam's given the same warning to Dean enough times to recognize it. But Sam doesn't give a damn, because he doesn't want her to be in pain. And he doesn't want her dead. Not when he just got her back. "Stop. I'll do anything – just stop."

Chuck shakes his head. "I created you, Sam. You think I can't tell when you're lying?"

"Take me," Sam says desperately. "You don't need her." And Sam hates himself when he says it, but he says it anyway. "If you need to get to Dean, all you need is me. So, take me."

OOO

Present day

Dean just drives.

The idea of returning to the bunker, having to face the echoing, vast hallways, the idea of having to see Cas, of having to pretend like nothing happened, pretend like all of it was just a damn mistake, is

unbearable.

And, dammit, Dean just got Cas back. He just patched things up with him. Just got him back from the Empty. They got through Purgatory. They got through the Apocalypse to end all Apocalypses. And, fucking of course, Dean had to go and screw it all up. Ruin it just like everything else Dean touches.

Dean clenches his hands around the worn, familiar grip on his baby's wheel. He floors the accelerator, and Dean tries to think *just like old times.* He turns the dial all the way up on "Thunder Road," like maybe it can drown out the *not.*

Drown out the fact that Sam is gone. Cas probably won't ever want to see him again.

He thinks about the other men he's been in bed with. Crowley was the last, but Dean was a demon and it's not like Dean in his right mind would ever – but what the fuck does that say about Dean's messed up psyche? That his most successful relationship with a man was the King of Hell. It definitely wasn't a healthy relationship, but at least it was mutual douchebagery, both taking exactly what they wanted from the other, no false pretenses.

And then there was Lee. It only really happened once or twice. Maybe five times. And they were drunk. Then Dad barged in on them. After Dean was dressed, he slapped Dean across the face while Lee watched, open-mouthed and draped in a blanket.

Don't you ever do that again, Dad said, and it wasn't like Dad had never been drunk on a hunt, before.

And Dean had to live with the fact that every time Dad looked at him, every time Dean couldn't help but think *he knew*. It hung over Dad's voice like a caveat when he told Dean, "And I am incredibly proud of you" *but* "I guess I had hoped eventually you would get yourself a normal life, a peaceful life. A family."

After that, Dean and Lee went to Arizona to take care of that cult, ended up ankle deep in the blood of children. Then Lee left. Lee asked Dean to come with him, but Dean said no, because Dad texted him about some voodoo shit in New Orleans. Then Dad stopped picking up his phone, and Dean drove straight through the night to Palo Alto to break into Sam's apartment and ruin his brother's life.

And Dean should have just left Sammy alone. Should have just left

him to his happily ever after with Jess. Because wasn't that what happened? When they yanked Dad out of the timeline, alternate Sammy did just fine: obsessed with kale, but what's new? Without Dean, Sammy was A-Okay. Dean should never have come crawling and begging. Should have killed himself after Sammy left, during those horrible months of waiting for Sam to come back, to call, to anything, and Dean spent a couple nights in the back of the Impala, cradling his sawed-off, and thought about how easy it would be.

Because, truth is, Dean just doesn't know how to be alone. He knows there's something wrong with him. There's something pitiful, something disgustingly needy inside of him that makes him drag other people into his shit.

I can see it in your eyes, Dean, Meg simpered, grinning with Sam's face, digging her thumb into the bullet hole in Dean's shoulder, *you're worthless*.

Are you that scared of being alone that you'd rather let Jo die?

Because, after Sam left, Dean hung onto Dad until he smothered him. Until Dad bought a truck and left, too. And then Dean found Cassie, thought about shacking up with her for good, but then Dad called about a hunt and Dean couldn't – so Cassie called him crazy, delusion, told him to get professional help because he wasn't going to be her hard-luck case.

And he found Lee. Lee, who felt like a brother, but not really, because he checked all the boxes: *something with a hunter,* Sam said from the passenger seat, *somebody who understands the life*. And they talked about retiring, someday, setting up a bar together. The dream. But Lee is dead now, and Dean killed him. The dream turned out to be a fucking joke, just like always.

But then Sam was back, and everything was fine. Fucking fine until Sam dove headfirst into the Cage. Then Dean dragged poor Lisa and Ben into it, and they never deserved that.

In Purgatory there had been Benny. Until there wasn't Benny. They never talked about it after they got back from Purgatory. Like it was some sort of screwed up Vegas thing. And then Dean watched Benny's head bounce one, twice, three times on the pavement as his body sunk to the ground, spilled blood out of its neck.

And Cas doesn't –

Dean almost told him, once, when the sun hung heavy and dying in the sky, and he and Cas drove together to get more booze for their farewell toast. *But you're always there, you know? You're the best friend we've ever had* – and Dean stared out of the windshield, I love you, bounding through his brain, but it was the end of the world, and Cas didn't deserve to – *you're our brother, Cas, I want you to know that.*

Cas didn't deserve Dean's shit.

Dean can't get comfortable. It's like the bench doesn't fit right. He feels charged. Electricity chugs through his veins and he can't stop moving. Taps his fingers on the wheel. Jogs his left knee.

Abruptly, the only thought in his head is *too small*. The car is too damn small.

He shoves the wheel to the side, stomps the break because he's pretty sure he's going to drive himself right into a tree. The Impala skids to a stop on the gravel on the side of the road.

Too small to small too small. Dean flings the door open. There's grave dirt in his lungs. He swings his legs out of the car and braces his arms on his knees, puts his head down. *Like a damn coffin.*

His hands are shaking again. He thinks he's going to throw up. His lungs stick to his ribs, can't expand. He's dizzy. Sees stars.

And, ridiculously, Dean thinks about that guy with the safety pin through his nose. In New York when Dean was sixteen, snuck out on Sam and Dad after a hunt. Dean thinks about the *kill'em all* tattoo on the guy's chest, peaking out of his half-unbuttoned shirt. The club was loud, busy, choked with the smell of weed.

And that girl came up to him, stomach all smooth, tan skin, revealed by a tube top and a set of low-slung jeans. Dean was hard just looking at her. He watched her lips when she said, hand on his arm, *why don't you come over and sit down with me and my friends?*

And that guy. He had black, spiky hair, shot through with lime green highlights. He was wearing eye-liner. Got too close to Dean's face when he pressed drink after drink into Dean's hand. Tipped the cup to Dean's lips, made him drink, even though whatever it was made Dean's eyes water because he'd only ever had beer before, and just a shot of whiskey once or twice when Dad needed to stitch him up and they'd run out of pills.

The girl handed Dean a joint and the table laughed when Dean coughed his way through his first drag. And the girl simpered. Dean's hair stood up on his neck when she put her cherry pink mouth to his ear and whispered, *you know, you're kinda cute, kid,* and she put her hand on his crotch. His dick leapt forward at her touch.

He was too high to think about anything feeling wrong. It all just felt comfortable and slow: the rowdiness of the club drifted lazily into the background.

And then that guy crowded into Dean's space, put an arm over Dean's shoulder. He was practically sitting on Dean's lap. He had a ring of white power around his nostril. His eyes were swallowed by his pupils. He smelled like vodka, tasted like it, too, when he put his lips to the corner of Dean's mouth, flicked his tongue to nudge Dean's lips apart.

And it's been a long time since Dean thought about that part. That night's so warped and fuzzy with alcohol and drugs, that it's hard to know, sometimes, whether it ever happened at all. It's not something he ever told Sam about.

Dean was still hard. Still hard from the girl, and he stayed hard, when the guy stuck his tongue into Dean's mouth, forced apart his teeth, clamped his lips tight over Dean's. It was just like kissing a girl, really. Exactly the same: all soft lips, warm saliva. Except the hand in Dean's hair was larger, rougher. The tang of Old Spice was sharp in his nose.

Dean Winchester, his Dad said.

The guy climbed off Dean's lap. Took his arm off Dean's shoulders. Dean stared up at Dad's dark eyes, furrowed brows, and thought he was going to puke. Just keep puking.

The guy with the safety pin through his nose looked at the ground. *Sorry, sir,* he murmured, but Dad didn't even look at him. By then he had Dean's upper arm in a vice-like grip. He tugged Dean to his feet. The room whirled. Dad pushed him – two hands to the back – and Dean stumbled forward, caught himself on a table, tried to steady himself on his feet, but then Dad had his arm again and dragged him through the door.

The heat of late August hung heavy and wet over the dark city streets. It smelled like damp pavement and piss. The Impala waited at the curb under a streetlamp. The back window was down. Sammy craned his neck out like he was some kind of dumb dog.

Dad swung Dean around. Dean could see the anger in his father's eyes, glinting hard under the strobe lights leaking from the club's windows.

What the hell is wrong with you? Dad shook Dean, and Dean's body was like jello. He just flopped, chin dropping to his chest because he couldn't hold it up any longer. The world was awash with too many colors and sounds. Dean could still taste vodka on his lips.

And lots. Lots was wrong with Dean. It had been a year full of screwups. It started with losing Dad's money and getting caught stealing, and then Dad left him behind at Sonny's, and then Dean left Robin without saying goodbye, and then Dean lost his virginity to the first girl he could get to say yes in the school's storage closet, and then Dad got stupid mad at Dean for smoking cigarettes, and then –

I hate you, Dean mumbled. He couldn't feel his lips. *I fucking hate you.*

Dad slapped Dean across the face. Dean was too slow even to see it coming. His head snapped back on his neck. He went reeling. Ended up on all fours on the sidewalk and he didn't remember falling. His ears rung. His palms stung from where he'd caught himself on the pavement.

Son, Dad said, looming over Dean, not offering him a hand-up. And Dad didn't hit him. Not really. Dad never hit him. Unless Dean really fucked up. Like when Dean almost let that shtriga kill Sammy. Or when he cuffed him on the back of the head once or twice when Dean got mouthy. Open-palm slapped him across the face when he lost his nerve on a hunt.

You don't like me? That's fine. It's not my job to be liked.

Distantly, Dean heard the door of the Impala open. Dean thought they were far enough from the car, that the checkerboard streetlamps, haze of smoke, and darkness of night were enough so Sam couldn't see, that maybe he only saw Dean fall. Dean heard Sammy's tentative footsteps on the sidewalk, and Dean pushed himself up, knees weak, head tumbling, vision blurry around the edges, but he didn't want Sammy to see him on the ground.

It's my job to raise you right.

It was the first and last time he ever said he hated his father.

And then Sam made Dean tell the fucking story to Cas. Tell it like it was some big testament to the triumph of John Winchester's

fatherhood. And Dean had to make himself laugh it off, like he'd learned to laugh it off in the nearly twenty-five years since it happened.

Back on the side of the road, hanging half-way out of the Impala, Dean needs a drink. Needs a damn drink so bad he can taste it on his tongue, and he remembers what Sam said, stupid pleading look in his stupid puppy dog eyes, like he was a damn kid and begging for the last of the Lucky Charms: *If you just tried to pull back the drinking.*

But he downed the last of his whiskey before getting on the road. He knows he shouldn't be driving. Everything is fuzzy around the edges and he keep veering over the center line.

So what? He's a damn disappointment, what's new? Disappointed Dad. And disappointed Mom. And both of them are dead. Because of Dean, both of them are dead. And disappointed Sammy. Disappointed Jack. Disappointed Cas.

So what? So fucking what?

Somewhere in the back of his head, Dean is aware his phone is ringing. It's inside his coat on the passenger seat. It's probably Sammy or Cas calling to check up on him. They're probably worried. And they shouldn't be.

Dean can take care of himself. Should have taken care of himself long ago. So what, Dean's running? So what? Dean's used to giving up. It's just what he does. Gave up in Hell, didn't he? Tortured souls for ten years and liked it. Felt kinda homesick after Cas dragged his sorry ass topside. Gave up with Michael. Gave up when he had the Mark. Gave up with the Ma'lak Box. Gave up with the whole God-thing.

What you're doing now – it's wrong! It's quitting, Sam said before he landed his fist on Dean's jaw, before Dean pulled him into a hug, promised he'd go home.

Shouldn't be worried because Dean's fine. Damn fine.

Dean just needs a drink. Needs a drink and needs to lie down somewhere. Needs to sleep, because there's something pounding inside his head. Taking a jackhammer to his skull from the inside-out. Michael is yelling in his ear. *I'll kill them. Kill them all and make you watch. Until you beg me to burn you to a husk. But I won't let you. I'll never let you go.*

Dean pulls the door shut behind him. He starts the car again, wheels back onto the road. Drives until his finds a liquor store. He loses time between then and getting back on the road. It's something that's been happening more often lately. There are stretches of blank moments in his brain, full of hazy images and buzzing noise, snatches of conversation. He knows he must have gone into the liquor store, made some kind of quip to the man at the counter about a football game while he cashed out two fifths of whiskey and a six pack. He knows he must have, because the booze is clanking in a paper bag on the passenger seat, now.

There's a cheap motel up ahead. Dean doesn't know how long he's been driving. It's getting dark. The sun sinks below the tips of the pine trees that line the road. There are only a few other cars in the parking lot.

It's the usual Winchester place. Looks like home. The last time he stayed in a joint like this, it was Sam and his last hunt. Just a simple salt n' burn. In and out. Milk run.

Cas and Jack were on a road trip, just the two of them. Father-son bonding or some shit. And Eileen had gone back to Ireland for a few days to settle something about property.

Two beds against the wall, just like old times. It was March, but it was also mid-Texas and warm as balls. There wasn't any air conditioning, just a box fan beating futilely against the heat, recycling warm air. Dean sipped Beam from a glass, back against the headboard, ankles cross. Sam bounced around the room, a frenetic energy in his movements that was in-between nervousness and excitement: jack-in-the-box that had been sitting on his springs for too long.

We – Eileen's done hunting, he said.

The heat plus the alcohol plus the unidentifiable ache in the center of Dean's body make him sleepy. He thought about taking off his boots, curling into the bed, not getting up again.

It was difficult to fall asleep that night. They hadn't shared such close quarters in a while. Sound doesn't carry well in the bunker, muffled by stretches of cavernous corridors and thick walls. And the sounds Sam made while he slept, sounds that used to be soothing in their familiarity, made Dean's teeth itch: ruffling sheets, scuffing shoes, clearing his throat, click of the light switch that plunged the room into darkness.

Dean startled awake at the first sound of the hitch in Sam's breathing. Dean rocketed up in bed, gripped the gun under his pillow, but Sam was just having a nightmare, breathing too hard, murmuring indistinguishable words under his breath, something that sounded like a whimper and droves a knife into Dean's gut.

Sammy – Dean barely got out before Sam shot up, eyes wild and gasping for breath. *Just a nightmare,* said Dean, own heart beating too-fast. Of course. Of course, Dean wasn't the only one who still got nightmares.

Sorry, Sam muttered. He ran a hand over his face. In the gray light, Dean couldn't tell whether it was sweat or tears his little brother wiped away. He pulled his hair out of his eyes. He didn't seem to want to look at Dean, so he fumbled for the alarm clock on the table between the beds.

It was nearly five. *No point in trying to go back to sleep,* he said. *Gonna go for a run.*

Dean didn't reply. He watched wordlessly as Sam grabbed a handful of clothes from his duffle and headed toward the bathroom. He emerged a moment later wearing athletic shorts and a tank. Sam left before Dean could think of something to say.

Because the only thing Dean wanted to say was *please stay.* And the only thing Sammy wanted to do was leave.

Dean spent the morning in bed, staring at the ceiling for long enough to lose track of time. His cell buzzed with an incoming text. There were things he should be doing: getting out of bed, showering, grabbing breakfast from downstairs. At least nabbing a cup of coffee to recharge before hitting his laptop for research. Maybe caffeine would help clear his head, make everything stop feeling so slow and colorless.

His cell buzzed again. Dean inched his hand toward the phone on the bedside table. His arms were heavy, strangely unwieldy. Maybe he was getting sick. Maybe it was just the lifetime's worth of built-up injuries finally coming back to bite him in the ass. But he'd woken up sore before. It never felt like this.

The texts were from Sam: *Getting breakfast. Want anything? Coffee? I'm grabbing you coffee.*

Dean thought about replying. He put his thumb to the keypad, but the

door swung open and Sam came through, sweat stains around his neck and underarms.

You still in bed? said Sam, brow wrinkling. And it wasn't what Sam was supposed to say. He was supposed to jostle Dean's foot and crow *up and at 'em, lazy ass*. And, fuck, that meant Sam was worried. And Sammy didn't need to be worried. Not when Sammy was worried about so many other things.

Sam moved around the room like he'd lost the ability to stand still. He looked like he was training for the Olympics, or some crap, all restless, urgent inertia, but that was just Sammy.

At least, Dean thought it was just Sammy. He couldn't remember. He thought that sometime along the road, they switched places: Dean used to be the hyperactive one, always too much energy and not enough places to put it, itching to shoot things, kill things, get things done. Sam used to be the pensive, silent presence, grounding Dean as he spiraled from one thought to another, place to place to hunt to hunt. Now Sammy exhausted Dean just by watching him gulp down his breakfast and coffee, strip off his drenched tank, revealing a torso pockmarked by scars.

Sam paused before heading into the bathroom. He looked at Dean strangely, and Dean realized it was because he'd never answered him before.

Must'a fallen back asleep, Dean murmured, and roused himself, and *Sammy, God, quit nagging*. Because Dean was fine. Fine.

Damn fine, Dean thinks again. And he's standing in front of the sink in the motel room. He's got a bottle of Vicodin in his hand. He doesn't remember where he got it from, the last time he or Sammy landed in an emergency care clinic and nabbed a prescription. Dean can't remember whether he's taken any tonight already.

He stares at the label for a while, trying to read the proper dose because his head hurts and his eyes hurt and his chest hurts, but his vision warps the words and he just tips four or five pills into his palm, dry swallows them and then looks in the mirror. He stares at his face and tries to think *just me. This is me. Just me in here*. But the face in the mirror doesn't connect to the me inside Dean's head. He blinks. The reflection blinks. He raises a hand, rubs his palms over the scruff on his chin. The reflection raises its hand, scrubs its face.

Dean shut his eyes. The world turns slowly under his feet, so he has to

be careful how he walks. He shoves himself in the general direction of the door, thinks about collapsing back into bed.

He trips over an empty bottle of whiskey on the way and laughs at nothing, turns to say something to Sam, expecting his brother to be there, knuckling the sleep out of his eyes and ready to ask Dean if he's okay, but Sammy isn't there.

Sam's empty bed is made, undisturbed. Fuck. Right. Cuz Sammy's not here. Sammy moved out of the bunker one – two weeks ago. And, shit, it's starting to sound like a countdown in Dean's head, just like it did nineteen years ago when Sam stormed off to Stanford: one day without Sammy, two days, three days, four…

And how high can he count before drifting off to sleep? He falls back onto his bed, atop rumpled blankets and pillows. The bottle of pills in his hand rattles. The springs jostle the nausea in his stomach. He fishes for the bottle he left somewhere on the mattress. His fingers close around the neck.

He pulls whiskey down his throat until he gags. Until he has to sit up and choke out the burning, bubbling feeling in his throat. He swallows desperately and tries not to throw up. He doesn't know how much he's drank so far, and he doesn't want to have to start over.

He can't remember if he took the Vicodin already, or not. He remembers that time he punctured a lung and spent a few days with Bobby. Bobby doled out the stuff like it was a precious mineral. Dean remembers choking down the handful of pills in that clinic when he thought Sammy was dead. He remembers puking up his guts the whole night after, swearing he wouldn't do it again.

He struggles to remove the child protection cap on the bottle of pills. His fingers are clumsy and numb. There's a weird tingling spreading down his arms. All over his body. He manages to get the cap off. Tosses back a couple more pills with another swallow of whiskey.

His belly is bloated. His skin is hot, feels too-loose around his bones. His face is warm and itchy, like maybe there's something burning inside his head.

Burning burning burning. Like Mom burned. Dean dreamed of burning for years as a child. Just fire and smoke and the smell of charred meat. Dean blinks up at the ceiling and imagines blood dripping onto his face. Hears screaming. Sorry Mom. Sorry sorry sorry should have saved you should have done better should have

There's his gun in the duffle he brought in. It would be quicker. But he's tired. Just so tired. Tired of everything. Tired of running. Tired of quitting. Tired of letting people down. Tired of hunting. Tired of not hunting. Tired of getting out of bed.

We're the guys who save the world. We don't just check out of it. Sam screams inside Dean's head, and sorry, Sammy, sorry, because there are two options here: either the world's already saved or the world's never going to be saved, and Dean can't do a damn thing about it.

There's a buzzing in Dean's head. Buzzing on the floor. Someone calling. Sammy? Sammy's calling. Sorry, Sammy, but Dean can't come to the phone right now. Can't come to the phone and Sammy? Sammy, sorry sorry sorry. But Sammy will be okay.

Sammy will be okay because Sammy has Jess now. Has his happily-ever-after-happily-ever-apartment with

Shit.

Eileen.

Sam has Eileen now. So Sam will be okay. All set without his older brother. Doesn't need Dean. No one needs Dean the way Dean needs other people.

You fight. You fight for this family. But the truth is they don't need you, not like you need them.

Dad didn't need Dean. Mom didn't need Dean. Mom left one, two, three, four times, now. Cas and Jack will be okay. Because they've got their whole father-son schtick thing going. No one needs Dean. Dean's a good little soldier and there's no one else around for him to be a soldier for.

The phone keeps buzzing buzzing buzzing. Fills Dean's head with buzzing. A swarm of wasps behind his eyes. Bees. Cas likes bees. Stupid, floating, lumbering bees stopping from flower to flower.

Let me go, Dean thinks. *Just let me go*.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning (spoilers): Dean attempts suicide with alcohol and pain medication. Also, he has a flashback involving nonconsensual touching and kissing while Dean is underage; the

flashback also includes John slapping Dean.

OOO

So, in 10x9, Sam and Dean play the whole New York story as some kind of big moral allegory for fatherhood, but, like, damn. Cuz if you really pay attention to that story, it's hella dark: Dean's "way underage" when he sneaks into a club, is asked to join a table by a strange girl, and then she and her friends get Dean "not the fun kind of drunk." Dean even says "I'm not quite sure what was in that stuff." Whoa. Sketchy much? And the boys just laugh about it (because of course they do). Actually, that whole episode was pretty dark, what with the whole Randy-selling-Claire thing, but I guess the darkest episodes are always the ones where the people are more monster than the monsters are.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months ago

Cas places two fingers to Dean's forehead. His face screws up. He looks like he's in pain. And the healing doesn't feel like any other healing Dean's experienced. For one thing, it hurts. Usually there's a flash of blinding pain, kind of a punch of every sensation at once, but this time the pain lingers. It burns, writhes, and fills up Dean's every pore.

Dean is fairly certain he's screaming. Someone's screaming. And he can feel his skin, his sinew and torn muscles knit themselves together. And then the pain fades to a dull ache, and Dean chokes and spits out blood, lungs again able to expand.

"Fuck, Cas," Dean gasps. "The hell was that?" He peels himself away from Cas's lap, turns, and lunges on instinct to catch Cas as the angel collapses.

"Dean," Cas gulps for air. "You have to hurry. The portal is…we only have a few more minutes."

"What the hell did you do?" Dean roars, and he shakes Cas's shoulders. Panic courses through his body, singing in the back of his head. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I –" Cas swallows with difficulty. He is entirely limp in Dean's arms. Dead weight. "Can't make it. You have to –"

"I don't have to do fucking anything," Dean snaps.

Cas doesn't appear to hear him. His hand skitters across the leaf-strewn ground, and for a wild moment Dean thinks Cas is trying to hold his hand, but then Cas presses something into Dean's palm: the Leviathan blossom. Slightly crushed.

And Dean sure as hell doesn't do chick flick moments. And this sure as hell smells like a fucking chick flick moment.

"Take it," Cas whispers.

“Fuck you,” Dean says. Dean stuffs the stupid flower into his jacket pocket, then he crouches on the ground, hooks his arms under Cas’s shoulders and heaves. Something pulls painfully in his abdomen and Dean hisses; clearly Cas wasn’t able to finish the healing before his strength gave out.

“Dean, no,” Cas protests feebly.

Dean sets his teeth against the pain in his stomach and the burn in his shoulders. He braces one leg between Cas’s knees, then he loops Cas’s arm around his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and lifts Cas into a fireman’s carry.

“For once in your Goddamn life,” Dean wheezes. “Shut the fuck up.”

Then Dean staggers toward the yellow strip of light, which sizzles and chokes as it gets smaller and smaller. Dean doesn’t think he can physically walk another step, so he uses his momentum and just lets himself fall face forward. His shoulder hits the strip of light, and the air changes immediately.

As soon as Dean and Cas collapse onto the cement floor of the bunker archive room, the portal fizzes shut behind them.

Dean just stays on his hands and knees for a moment, gasping hard through the pain in his stomach. Cas is on his back, but Dean can hear him coughing weakly, so at least the son of a bitch is still alive.

“That was,” Cas says finally, his voice a rasp, “exceedingly foolish.”

It makes anger flare in Dean’s chest, strong enough to propel him onto his heels. He glares at Cas, sprawled on the floor. “I just saved your Goddamn life,” Dean spits.

Cas struggles onto his elbows, losing whatever color he’d managed to regain. “At what might have been the expense of the entire world! What if the delay made you miss the portal?”

“A fucking thank you would be enough, Cas!” Dean staggers to his feet. His head whirls from the earlier blood loss, and his stomach cramps in protest. Dean holds one arm against his abdomen. The other hand finds the table to keep himself on his feet.

“I’m not worth that!” Cas roars, and he manages to make himself sound fierce, despite the fact he’s still lying on the floor. He looks angry. Just as angry as he had been when he fucking walked out and

disappeared for days after a load of shit about Dean not needing him anymore.

Dean's yelling before he can stop himself, "Yeah, well, you fucking are to me!" The words pulse hotly in Dean's throat, and it only makes him angrier, because he didn't mean to say them.

Cas frowns. Dean would punch him if he wasn't already down for the count.

"And I'm not letting you fucking leave again!" Dean says. "All you ever do is fucking leave! So – so fuck you – because that – you're not fucking allowed to leave again." And fuck this, because Dean wasn't supposed to *cry*.

He turns too quickly on his heel. Something wobbles off-center inside his head. He renews his grip on the table, brushes his sleeve over his eyes and smells dirt. Smell blood. His clothes are torn and filthy.

"You don't get to tell me what I'm allowed and not allowed to do," Cas says through gritted teeth, but when Dean looks at him again, he appears marginally less angry. In fact, there's an uncomfortable glint of understanding in his eye. Maybe something akin to amusement.

Cas tries to push himself into a sitting position, but he winces, and Dean moves. "Don't be such a fucking bitch," Dean says gruffly. He drags one of Cas's arms over his shoulders and hauls him into a standing position. The added weight almost takes Dean down.

"Don't be such a fucking asshole," Cas replies.

Something catches in Dean's throat – it might be a smile or it might be a sob. Whatever it is, he swallows it down again. Together, he and Cas hobble into the hallway. Dean marvels at the silence throughout the bunker, and he thinks about the fact that Sam and Eileen really should be back from their vamp hunt and banging in his queen-sized bed by now.

Unease stirs in Dean's belly, and he says, "Where the hell is Sam?"

OOO

Present day

As soon as Sam leaves the roadhouse's parking lot, he regrets it, and guilt blooms with a deep, resonating pang in his stomach. But he

didn't know what else to do, because if he'd had to spend one more second with Dean, he would have started yelling. And neither of them needs that right now. Not Dean with his hangover. Not Sam with his frustrating habit of bursting into tears whenever he starts shouting at his brother.

So, he drove the hour back to his apartment, stewing in his anger and worry, fighting the impulse to turn off at the side of the road to call Dean, call Cas, or just make the U-turn and head back to the roadhouse, make sure Dean was okay. Hadn't gone back inside the bar for another drink. Hadn't decided to –

Why did everything always have to be so complicated? Is it too much to ask for just one stretch of calm? To ask for something good for a change?

Because just when it seems like things might be quieting down – because one second Sam's searching how to sign *can I kiss you?* on YouTube and driving to the nearest Bed, Bath, and Beyond for a sale on towels, and the next second his brother's spiraling down the well-traveled path of self-destruction. It's not like Dean's never been here before: after Dad died, after Hell, that awful year with the Leviathans when Sam had been so lost in his own trauma that he'd nearly missed Dean's warning signs. Then the Mark of Caine. And when Cas died. And when Mom died. And then when Cas and Dean were barely speaking to each other.

So, yeah, Dean's been in a dark place before. Sam has, too. But they always manage to climb out of it. Because there's too much depending on them to not take a knee. And now that – now that things are more peaceful – it should be even easier to get back into the saddle, right? Now that Dean's got some breathing room. And living with Cas and Jack was supposed to be a good thing.

But now there's something going one between him and Cas, and neither of them are talking about it.

Again.

We had a…disagreement, Cas said when he called Sam last night, told Sam he was worried because he hadn't heard from Dean all day and he'd left the bunker in a bad mood.

A disagreement? Sam asked. *What about?*

And Cas sounded so pathetically uncomfortable that Sam immediately

regretted asking. *It was…I think Dean would prefer if you did not…I mean, I would – it was –*

And it's not like Sam never…wondered before. That whole *Profound Bond* thing. They'd treated it like a joke. But seeing the way Dean fell apart when Cas died or whenever Cas disappeared. And sometimes Sam just got the sense that he was intruding on the two of them when they were in a room alone.

Eileen picked up on it, too, and she's the expert when it comes to body language and facial expressions. She cocked an eyebrow at Sam, once, early on when Cas and Dean could still barely tolerate being in the same room together, and she asked him *lover's spat?* And Sam had laughed, because, surely, she'd meant it as a joke, but Eileen just shrugged, said *they could have fooled me*.

Sam knows there's a shit ton about his brother that he doesn't know and that Dean will probably never tell him. And Dean's always been teetering on the *doth protest too much* edge. Because Sam had never even *heard* of Lee Webb, the guy Dean palled around with while Sam was at school, until Dean came back from his long weekend in Texhoma with a couple dozen new bruises and got drunk in the bunker's kitchen, mumbling nonsense about *a damn stupid dream*.

And then that whole thing with Benny. Like, Sam gets the whole in-the-trenches thing. But Dean and Benny were *close*.

But it's not like Dean will ever admit to it. Dean's forty-one, and old habits die hard. And Sam knows for a fact Dad drilled in some Goddamn old habits into the two of them. And Dean and Cas – they've known each other for over ten years now? Wouldn't something have happened by now if…?

But, either way, it makes Sam's anger wither away to a taut sadness, thinking about his brother like that. Thinking about Dean as lost and confused. Uncertain and insecure. Feeling like maybe there was something wrong with him when there *isn't*. Of course, there fucking isn't.

Sam suddenly knows, like a punch to his gut, that he shouldn't have left Dean alone. He should have insisted on Dean returning to the bunker, should have followed him in his car to make sure he got there alright. He shouldn't have left Dean when Dean was alone and hurting and probably in one of his self-hatred freefalls. Because no one ever does self-loathing quite so thoroughly as Dean Winchester, and Sam

should have stuck around to –

Because Sam knows Dad was an alcoholic, knows it even though the one time he brought it up to Dean, Dean viciously denied it. But that's probably because Dean's an alcoholic, too. It's like some ridiculous shared secret the two of them keep from each other. Since Dean picked Sam up from Stanford fifteen years ago, Sam can count on one hand the number of times he's seen Dean totally sober: right after he got back from Hell – and it didn't last long; as soon as the nightmares started up, so did the drinking – after he got back from Purgatory, and for that one-week attempt at a twelve-step-program when he had the Mark of Cain.

Sam's made the decision to turn his car around and head back to the bar when he realizes he's already turned down his apartment's street. At this point, there's no use going back. Instead, he pulls into the parking lot behind the apartments, and sits for a minute in his car, fishing out his cell phone.

Dropped Dean off with his car, he sends a text to Cas. *Let me know when he gets back to the bunker.*

I will do so, Cas's reply is almost immediate, which makes Sam think Cas's probably been staring at his phone for the past hour, waiting for Sam to contact him. *How did he seem?*

Sam's thumb hovers over the keypad for a long moment, not sure what to say or how to say it. *Don't know*, he eventually settles on. *Not great. Better than last night.*

Thank you for letting me know, Cas texts back. Sam slides his phone into his back pocket and gets out of the car.

Eileen isn't waiting for Sam when he lets himself into the apartment and it isn't like Sam expected her to be – it's just that he'd been looking forward to talking to her when he got in, of folding into her arms and her concern, of burying his nose in her hair. It's something he never got tired of. Something he'd never stop waiting to disappear.

It'd been a long time since Sam hallucinated Lucifer, but sometimes he still woke up with an unsettled, disembodied feeling, the nagging thought at the edge of his mind that none of this was actually real. Sometimes he still heard whispers inside of his mind, almost like echoes of past screaming, but that was something he hadn't told anyone else about.

If it wasn't for Cas, Sam knows, he'd still be in that psych ward. Lost inside his own head. Cas absorbed that trauma for Sam, and even though most of his time spent in the Cage is just blank space, now, Sam's body still sometimes responds to it: strange reactions to fear and pain, a certain way someone says his name or touches him.

He doesn't have to dig his thumb into his palm, anymore, clawing his way back to reality through phantom pain. He's found other ways of centering himself, looked up breathing exercises, actually talking about it. Lately, it's helped just to hold Eileen, remind himself that she really was okay. Alive. Breathing. Here.

But Eileen isn't anywhere inside the small apartment, and, before Sam can work himself up to worry – because a small, frightened part of him will always check the ceilings when he walks into an empty apartment – he spots a note from her on the counter: *headed to my interview. Be back around 5:00.*

And, shit, yeah. Eileen's interview. Between worrying about Dean and dealing with Dean and texting Cas about Dean, Sam had completely forgotten that Eileen had an interview at Cloud County Community College, a local school about an hour away.

Because Eileen's not only fierce and driven and beautiful – witty and funny and so much more than Sam deserves – she also actually found time over the years to get a dual degree in religious and mythological studies. And she's also damn practical, which means she's been busting her ass trying to get a job because she isn't going to wait around for the money from Lillian O'Grady's estate to run out.

Meanwhile, Sam's been lazing around, wracking his brains unsuccessfully for some kind of career that demands the kind of talents he's acquired through hunting – because it's not like hitman or cat burglar are viable options, even though Sam certainly has the skillset.

It's not like he has any issues about Eileen being the main breadwinner, it's just that it's not fair to put that burden on her. Sure, he guesses he contributed by getting them a reduced rent on the apartment when he agreed to do handyman work around the complex, but he wants to do more for Eileen than that. She deserves a house with an actual driveway, hallways that don't smell like weed, neighbors who don't play the Grateful Dead at four o'clock in the morning, and – and other things.

But every time Sam starts thinking too far ahead into the future, something inside his brain starts blaring like the robot's alarm on those crummy *Lost in Space* reruns he and Dean used to watch as kids: *Danger, danger, Will Robinson.*

Because Sam knows what happens when he starts planning for things. What happened when he depended too much on a future with Jess or Amelia.

Sam's tried out normal before. It doesn't stick for long. And it usually ends in flames.

Sam sighs, crumples up Eileen's note and tosses it in the trash. Then he heads into the bedroom to grab his laptop. He brings it back out and sets it up on the kitchen island, pulls up a stool, because they don't have room for a dining room table.

Eileen deserves room enough for a dining room table. Even though neither of them technically know how to cook more than to warm up canned soup and butter toast.

After his laptop's awake, Sam opens the internet browser, and, even though he knows Dean will hate him for it, types into the search bar *how to stage an intervention.*

OOO

It's an hour later when his cellphone rings. Sam checks the screen to see Cas is calling, so he swipes his phone open and puts it to his ear. Before he can say anything, Cas's voice comes through:

"Have you heard from Dean?"

Sam's skin prickles with unease, because Cas sounds worried, and Sam's been on the wrong end of calls like this one too many times.

"He's not back yet?" Sam says.

"No," Cas says unhappily. "I've been calling him, but he won't pick up. He should be back by now."

Sam checks the time and does a few quick calculations. "It's only thirty minutes late, man. And he wasn't in the best mood, he might have stopped somewhere –"

"Sam," Cas interrupts. "He should be here."

And it feels like a reprimand, even though Sam knows Cas didn't mean it to be. Dean should be at the bunker. Dean should be with at least one of them. Sam shouldn't have let Dean out of his sight. Sam should have made sure Dean was going home before he left him.

"Listen," Sam says, trying hard to ignore the anxious ache in his chest. "I'll try to call him. If I don't hear back from him in twenty minutes –"

"I think we should start looking for him now," Cas cuts him off again.

And, yeah, Sam's worried about his brother. He's been worried about Dean for a long time, but he's not *this* worried. Not as worried as Cas sounds. And Cas being worried is making Sam more worried.

"If something's happened to him it's my fault," Cas says.

"Cas, man," Sam tries for placating; he thinks he falls somewhere around confused. "It's – Dean's been gone before. He was gone all yesterday and he turned out – I mean, not fine. But this is *Dean*. He can look after himself."

"It's not –" Cas stops. Sam can hear him breathing on the other end of the line. Short and sharp. "It's not that, Sam. It's –"

"Cas…" Sam says carefully. "What's wrong?"

"I just –" Cas tries again. His voice sounds strangled. If Sam didn't know any better, he'd say Castiel was near tears – which was…Sam knows that Cas technically can cry. He's seen Cas get teary on the extremely rare occasion. But to think that it might be happening now is…alarming. "I can't hear prayers anymore."

"Okay?"

"At least, not precisely. Not without my Grace. But I…there's still a certain resonance. Between me and certain people. People who I know the voice of particularly well."

"Like Dean?" Sam guesses.

"Yes," Cas blows out a breath. "Like Dean. And Sam – I think he might be praying. I can't be positive. But I think – it's confused and – and unsettled. I don't know if that's me or Dean. But he sounds – he sounds afraid, Sam. I think he might be in trouble."

"Okay," Sam takes a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He grips

his phone tightly. *It was supposed to be over,* he thinks, and at the same time, *can't they ever catch a break?* And also *screw you, Dean*. "Okay, I'm still going to try to call him. If he doesn't pick up, I can track his phone. And then we'll see. Maybe I'd better drive up to the bunker…"

"No need," Cas says quickly. "I'm already on my way to you."

OOO

The GPS tracker in Dean's phone lands on a motel off Route 36, about one-hundred miles East. And maybe Dean just needs some time, maybe he just needs a couple nights away to get his bearings.

But Cas shows up, all wound-up energy and nervous pacing, eyes shadowed and hair sticking up on end from running his hands through it so many times, that Sam doesn't argue when Cas says they should go to the motel to find out.

Sam drives; he's half-surprised Cas didn't manage to get into a wreck on his way there.

"I left Jack at the bunker in case…" Cas trails off, chewing his lip, eyes glued to the road ahead. Sam doesn't know what he was going to say. In case what? What exactly does Cas think they're walking into, here? Some kind of attack or trap? Or just Dean again, maybe passed out drunk again or – God, Sam hopes not – with some girl he picked up from a bar.

They're both packing the usual weapons. It's only been a couple weeks, so Sam never got around to putting his gun away. It's a habit he hopes he won't have for the rest of his life, but it's not something he's ready to give up yet, either.

Sam sent Eileen a cursory text to let her know not to worry if he's not there when she gets back from her interview. And he told her not to worry about Dean, either. Because there's nothing to fucking worry about. Sam doesn't understand why Cas is so worried. Why he's letting Cas whip him into such a frenzy.

But Cas insists, "He's – something's wrong, Sam. I know it. He's in distress."

Cas keeps up an endless stream of it until Sam can barely keep still: he taps his fingers on the wheel and bounces his knee, fiddles with the radio, but there's nothing but static for miles on these roads.

“Cas,” Sam interrupts when he finally can’t take it anymore. “What the hell happened between you two?”

It certainly makes Cas shut up. Cas swallows a couple times. He’s still looking straight out the windshield.

“I think…I, ah,” Cas says quietly. “I think I took a liberty that I should not…and, ah, I might have *offended* –”

“Offended?” Sam’s eyebrows shoot up. “I’ve seen my brother offended, Cas. And, let me tell you, Dean hits things when he’s offended. He doesn’t act like this.”

“I think I might have hurt him,” Cas says in a small voice. “And I just need to make sure he’s alright, Sam.”

The silence in the car prickles; there’s something there, on the tip of Sam’s tongue, he just doesn’t know what it is. Cas fidgets in the passenger seat. Sam’s brain runs at one-hundred miles per hour: *I think I took a liberty that I should not* -

“Cas…” Sam starts. It’s difficult to drag the words up his throat, mostly because he’s not entirely sure how to say this. “Are you and – ah –”

“I love your brother,” Cas says suddenly.

Sam’s stomach does something strange: seizes and then deflates. Because *duh*. Because *of course*. It’s something Sam’s known for a long time, just something he’s never fully realized he knew.

“Cas…he, ah,” Sam says. His throat is dry. “He loves you, too –”

“No,” Cas cuts him off. “I *love* your brother.” Cas turns to look at Sam, and Sam lets his eyes flicker from the road to Cas, but Cas looks so desperately hurt and scared. So vulnerable. That Sam can’t bear to look at him.

“And I can’t be sure,” Cas swallows. “I’m not human, Sam. I’m not an angel anymore, either, I don’t think. So, I can’t be certain that the things I feel…these emotions are one in the same with what human’s know of love. But I am sure – for me – that what I feel for your brother….”

“It’s, um,” Sam clears his throat. Because Dean’s had plenty of flings in his life, and Sam’s only ever talked to a handful of them, and never

about something like this. “That’s great, man.”

“Is it?” Cas asks. And he sounds like he’s pleading. Shit. “If he doesn’t feel the same, Sam? If….”

“Listen, Cas,” Sam says. He takes one hand off the wheel to rub the back of his neck. His palms are clammy. “I can’t, ah, I can’t say whether or not Dean…I don’t even know if Dean, ah, *likes* men. You know. Like that.”

Cas is silent for a long time. Sam can feel his eyes on him, blinking and owlish. “I assumed you knew,” he says softly.

And Sam nearly careens the car off the side of the road. Sam can hear his heart thudding in his ears. “I mean, I,” but there is zero way for him to save face right now. “I *wondered*, you know. But Dean doesn’t – we don’t really talk about stuff like that.”

“I understand human conceptions about sexuality can be… complicated,” Cas says tentatively.

“What?” Sam says. He looks at Cas again, and Cas looks frightened, but also a little fierce. It dawns on Sam that Cas looks protective. “What, man? No. That’s not – no. I don’t care. That’s not what I mean. Dean is my brother, man. I don’t give a damn who he likes to, ah…”

Cas matches Sam’s gaze for a minute before nodding once and turning away. “Good.”

They fall back into silence as they get closer to where Dean’s cell signal is coming from.

“Is he still praying?” Sam asks quietly, not able to handle the silence. Trying not to replay the conversation he just had with Cas. Trying not to worry about where Dean might be or what he might be doing.

“He’s calmer now,” Cas says tightly.

“You think he’s drunk again?” Sam asks. Because if they’re going to talk about Dean, they might as well hit all the bases.

“It’s very possible,” Cas sighs. “I’m worried about him.”

“Yeah,” Sam says heavily. “Me too.”

“Do you think he would…benefit from professional help?” Cas says. He’s looking at his fingers.

“I don’t know,” Sam breathes hard through his nose. “Yeah. But, it’s not like – I mean, that one time I landed in the psych unit – it’s not like our lives have been normal. It’s hard to sort out the regular crap from the…you know.”

“I know,” Cas says.

A turnoff for a shabby motel appears on the side of the road, one of their usual stops. Sam scans the parking lot, and his eyes immediately find the Impala.

“There,” Cas says. His voice is choked with a mixture of worry and relief. Sam’s shoulders drop; he hadn’t realized how tense he’d gotten. And he tries not to think about how angry Dean is about to be when he find out they came running after him like a couple concerned parents.

The Impala is parked in front of the only door with a *Do Not Disturb* sign on the doorknob, which is an automatic move when it comes to them; there’s no use taking the chance that housekeeping walks in on a scene full of bared weaponry or motel room triage.

Cas is out of the car first. Sam’s right on his heels. Cas wraps his knuckles on the door and calls, “Dean? It’s us. Open the door.”

“Dean,” Sam joins in. “Dean. Open up, man.”

There’s silence from within the room. Cas and Sam look at each other. Cas turns back to the door and knocks again. “If you do not open this door, we’ll break it down.”

“Dean, dammit!” Sam says. His pulse jumps in his throat. “Cas, move,” he says, making his decision and shoving the angel out of the way.

He plants his left foot firmly on the ground, finds his center of balance, and raises his right foot. He drives his heel into the door, near the keyhole. It just takes one kick: there’s the sound of splintering wood and the door flies inward.

The motel room is dark. Sam blinks past the darkness, and he sees a limp shape sprawled on the nearest bed: still fully dressed, booted feet planted on the ground. Sam immediately knows something’s wrong. Dean sleeps on his stomach. He’s too still.

It’s like all the air’s gone from the room. Sam can’t hear his heartbeat anymore. Somewhere in the back of his head, he’s aware that Cas is

still there. That Cas is mirroring his every movement. Rushing shoulder to shoulder to Dean's side.

There's a low buzz of panic in the back of Sam's skull. It grows steadily louder until it's screaming.

"Dean, no," Sam breathes. He's across the room in a second. He kicks an empty whiskey bottle on the floor.

Sam hand finds Dean's shoulder: he's still warm. Not stone cold. Not – fuck. The other hand lands on Dean's throat, just under his jaw. His skin is clammy and cool. Sam waits for half a second, holding his breath, trying to find – there. A pulse. Slow and weak, but a pulse.

"He's alive," Sam croaks. He can barely hear himself.

"Sam," Cas says urgently. "Sam, he's not breathing."

Fuck. Fuck, Dean.

"Dammit, Dean!" Sam yells, and he takes ahold of both Dean's shoulders, shakes him. Dean's head lolls. His face is stark white in the darkness of the room. There's another empty bottle on the bed with him. Sam's toe nudges something small on the floor. He stoops to pick it up and immediately recognizes the feel of a prescription medication bottle. It's empty.

"Call an ambulance," Sam whispers to Cas.

"Sam –"

"Fuck, Cas!" Sam shouts. Horror gives way to pure reflex. "Do it now!" There's no way to know how long Dean's been lying here, not breathing. His heart's still going, but Sam can't be sure it will for much longer.

Sam's hands shake, but he doesn't have time to waste trying to find a calm center, so he plows through: just blocks everything out. Blocks out the stink of booze on Dean's clothes. Blocks out the sound of Cas taking out his phone and thumbing in 9-1-1.

Sam tries not to think about that time with the rawhead and the taser, so many years ago now, when Sam came back into the cellar to find Dean lifeless in the steaming puddle of water. He tries not to think about doing CPR for minute after minute, waiting for an ambulance, waiting for Dean to just fucking wake up already.

Sam pinches shut Dean's nostrils with on hand and presses against Dean's forehead with the heal of his hand. With the other hand, he hooks his fingers under Dean's chin, lifts up to make sure Dean's airway stays unobstructed. Then Sam takes a deep breath, seals his lips over Dean's, and exhales.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Dean's chest rise and fall from the rush of air. Sam takes his lips off Dean's to inhale again, then he repeats the process.

Distantly, he hears Cas's voice, talking to the dispatcher. "Room 104, Parksway Inn off Route 36. He is not breathing. He has a pulse. Yes, we are performing rescue breathing."

"Dean," Sam mutters desperately, checking for any response. "Don't do this to me, man. Don't you dare do this."

He puts his mouth back over Dean's – Dean's body arcs off the bed. Sam leaps backward just in time as Dean rolls over, choking. He vomits over the side of the bed. Sam grips Dean's shoulder.

"Come on," Sam says, blinking away the stinging in his eyes. "Come on, man. Get it all up."

Dean retches helplessly for several minutes, eyes still shut, sweat standing out on his forehead. Cas climbs onto the bed with him so he can hold him on his side. Dean tries to roll back, but Cas stops him.

Sam doesn't let go of Dean's shoulder. "Stay on your side, man," he says softly. "Recovery position. You know the drill."

At the sound of his voice, Dean's eyes flicker weakly. "S'mmy?" he murmurs.

"Yeah, man," Sam says. His throat aches so badly he can barely speak. "We're here. We've got you."

"M sorry, S'mmy," Dean says, and his eyes slip shut again.

"No, Dean," Sam says. "You gotta stay awake for me. Come on." When Dean doesn't respond, Sam digs his knuckle hard into his brother's sternum.

Dean's eyebrows pinch from the pain and he groans.

"Open your eyes, Dean," Cas prompts softly. He's holding Dean: one

arm over his belly, the other around his forehead. “Open your eyes for us.”

Dean’s eyelids whisper open again. “Cas?” he breathes.

“Just stay awake until the ambulance gets here,” Sam prompts.

“Not supposed to,” Dean says blearily. “Not…let me…S’mmy.”

“Fuck off, Dean,” Sam says. He is angry. He is so terribly angry it’s like boiling hot poison inside his veins. “Fuck you.”

“Sam,” Cas warns. His eyes are wide in disbelief and shock.

“No,” Sam says. “No, Cas. No.” He turns back to his brother, digs his thumb so hard into Dean’s shoulder that Dean winces. “Dean, you don’t get the easy way out, you hear me? You don’t get to do this to us.”

“S’mmy, please,” Dean says, and his eyes fill with tears. Sam’s heart stops. Dean gags, and then he’s throwing up again, and good. Good. Because that means he’s still awake. Still breathing. Getting all that shit out of his system.

Sam can hear sirens now. A minute later there’s the sound of tires skidding on pavement, slammed doors, frantic feet. The room floods with light as one of the EMTs thinks to turn on a lamp.

“Sir, I need to get to him,” a paramedic says to Sam, gently nudging him away from Dean, and Sam’s still so keyed-up on fight or flight instincts that he nearly throws a punch, but then he remembers that they called an ambulance. The ambulance is here. The ambulance is here to help. Help Dean. Help Dean because he fucking –

“How long has he been like this,” another EMT has prodded Cas off the bed. Cas watches from the corner of the room. He looks small and scared. Sam looks away. A third paramedic comes in with a backboard. The space is too cramped to roll a gurney in.

“He – ah, we don’t know,” Sam says. “Twenty minutes, maybe.”

“What did he have?” the EMT continues. He has gray in his hair. He appears to be in charge of the other two, another man and a woman.

“He – whiskey,” Sam gulps. He tastes acid. The room smells like alcohol and vomit and old cigarettes. “It looks like two fifths. And,

ah," he fishes for the empty bottle of painkillers he found on the ground. Vicodin. It's an old prescription, something they carried around for emergencies. Sam has no idea how many pills were leftover. "And this."

The EMT frowns. "Alright." He rattles something urgently into the radio clipped to his collar.

"Administering naloxone," says the woman. Her hair is blonde and tied into a tail at the back of her head. Sam's brain is in overdrive, picking up on superfluous details. The lightbulb flickers slightly. There's a fly buzzing in against the window, butting against the glass. It feels wrong to be pushed to the sidelines. He isn't used to not doing anything. He needs to get to Dean. He needs his hands back on his brother's body, to make sure that Dean's still –

"What's his name?"

"Dean," Sam swallows. "Dean Campbell."

"And you're his…?"

"Brother."

"Going into respiratory arrest," the woman says.

Sam thinks he's going to be sick. He's pressed tight against the night table between the two beds to give the EMTs room to work. The back of his knees hit the second bed, and he lets himself fall back onto it. Twists the comforter in his hand.

"Right, gotta ventilator," the third paramedic says. He steps forward with a case attached to tubing and a facemask. He opens Dean's slack mouth with his gloved hands, inserts the mouthpiece into Dean's lips, slips the halter over Dean's head to keep it in place.

"We ready for transport?" the woman asks.

"Yep," the older man says after he's finished talking into his radio again. "Let's get him out of here."

Sam watches numbly as they roll Dean onto the backboard and carry him out of the door, where a gurney is waiting just outside. The older EMT turns to address Sam.

"We're headed to Community Memorial. You'll follow us?"

“Yeah,” Sam clears his throat. “Yes. We’ll be there.”

The man looks at Sam kindly. There are crows’ feet at the corners of his eyes. “We’ll take good care of your brother, I promise.”

“Thanks,” Sam’s voice is rough. He tries again. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

> So, tiny and insignificant point: it always bugs me how - in the multiple times the boys or someone around them has stopped breathing, Dean or Sam never break out the CPR. Like you gonna tell me these guys don't know basic first aid? They know how to tie sutures with dental floss, but they don't know how to perform rescue breathing? (Yes, I do understand that it's difficult to film realistic-looking CPR when you're acting with real people...it's just something that always bothers me lol.)

Chapter 5

Three months before

The bunker is empty, but Dean's panic doesn't start up in earnest until he sees he's got several missed video calls from Eileen on his phone, and one alarming text: *hunt a trap. I'm coming back to the bunker.*

Because Eileen said *I* not *we*, so that means Sammy's not with her. And Sammy's supposed to be with her.

"Dean, what is it?" Cas says, but Dean ignores him.

Instead, he punches in Sam's number and puts his phone to his ear. He starts yelling as soon as the ringtone ends with Sam's answering machine. "Dammit, Sam! Where the fuck are you? Call me back, you bastard!"

"Dean!" Cas exclaims in exasperation, and Dean cuts his message off.

He turns to Cas, "Eileen said the hunt was a trap. She's heading back here, but she didn't say where Sam was –"

Cas's eyebrows drop. He's sitting, practically wilted, at the kitchen table. Neither of them have any physical injuries, so, in lieu of first-aid, Dean set them both up with a couple fingers of whiskey.

"Chuck?" says Cas.

"The hell do I know?" Dean yells. And, yeah, he's not making much progress on his *don't be a dick to Cas* resolution, but that was before Sammy got his ass missing.

But then Dean hears someone come in through the door to the garage down the hall. Only a few people have access to the bunker that way, Eileen is one of them, so Dean takes off, not before he points a finger at Cas's chest when Cas attempts to rise. "Stay there. I don't need you to pass out on the floor again."

Dean misses Cas's resulting eye-roll, because he's already limping as fast as he can down the hallway. He nearly barrels straight into Eileen who looks – she looks rough: there are dark shadows under her eyes and dried blood in her hair. She swallows when she sees Dean, and it looks like maybe she's been crying.

“He has Sam,” Eileen says at once. And that’s one thing Dean’s always admired about Eileen: her bluntness. “Chuck has Sam.”

OOO

Present day

It’s the third time Sam’s had to sit by and watch Dean breathe though a tube down his throat, and Sam’s getting pretty damn sick of it.

Dean’s unconscious in the hospital bed, chest rising evenly with the intubation tube down his windpipe. He’s hooked up to a myriad of monitors and wires: an IV dripping saline and meds into the crook of his left arm, a tube down his nose to drain his stomach, an oxygen monitor splinting his finger, ECG electrodes stuck to his chest, and a blood pressure cuff around his upper arm.

And Sam is so damn sick of it he could cry. For the past hour he’s been coaching himself away from a full-blown panic attack, trying desperately not to think about the other times: Dean’s body shredded from Azazel’s claws, doctors throwing around stupid words like *all we can do now is wait,* or Dean barely breathing through a swollen throat and a grade 3 concussion while Sam tried not to remember how good it felt to burn up Alastair’s body from the inside-out.

And dammit. Dammit, Dean. Because it’s not supposed to end like this. It isn’t supposed to end at all, not anymore. Not for a good long while yet.

Sam is so Goddamn angry he wants to shake Dean until his teeth rattle, shake him until he wakes up again, until he can sit up in bed, smile, pull some crap about it all being some big joke, no way had he really tried to – no way had Dean actually –

Sam didn’t know it was this bad. Sam would have done something, if he’d known how badly Dean was floundering.

But Sam *had* known. Some small part that he’d worked so hard to ignore *had* known. Sam should have intervened before it got to this point. He should have sat Dean down and *made* his brother talk about it. Made him stop drinking. Made him Goddamn believe that things could get better. Force things to get better.

“Sam,” Cas’s voice is soft, and the hand that touches Sam’s shoulder is softer, but Sam still flinches in surprise.

Sam pulls back into himself: to the hard, plastic chair and the air choked with the smell of antiseptic. He realizes his cheeks are damp with tears. He draws his sleeve across his face before answering.

“Yeah?”

“I called Jack,” Cas says, still in that gentle voice, and Sam wonders if it’s because Cas thinks Sam needs to be babied, or because Cas’s voice is wrecked. *I love your brother*, Cas said, just a little over an hour ago. And fuck. Because, yeah, this is torture for Sam, but Sam can’t imagine –

“He wants to come, but I told him he should wait. There’s nothing he can do here,” Cas says.

Sam interrupts him, “Cas, I’m – I’m sorry.”

Cas’s eyes cloud with confusion, “Sorry for what?”

“For,” Sam grapples for something to say, “For *this*. I don’t know. I don’t –”

“This,” Cas says with a firm squeeze to Sam’s shoulder, “is not your fault, Sam. I should have –”

Sam shrugs off Cas’s hand. “If it’s not my fault than it isn’t your fault either,” he says.

Cas swallows. He looks at the floor. He nods.

And Sam wonders if they’re going to talk about it. The whole drive to the hospital, the endless wait in the waiting room, the silent vigil over Dean’s body, the whole time they haven’t mentioned it: what *this* is. The fact that they just found Dean OD’d in a grungy motel room, with enough pain meds and alcohol in his system to take down a wolf hound. The fact that, if they hadn’t gotten there when they did, Dean would have –

“You saved his life,” Sam says. He licks his lips. He feels Cas’s eyes flicker to him, but this time Sam isn’t looking. Instead, he stares at Dean’s still body. His hand is lying open at his side; without thinking, Sam takes his brother’s hand in his own, pumps Dean’s palm, trying to ignore the stiffness, the coolness, of his brother’s skin. “If you hadn’t insisted we come after him, Cas….”

Cas doesn’t reply. There’s a beat of silence before he says, “Do you

think it was intentional?"

Sam's eyes burn. He stares at his brother's face: swollen from the medication, but there's no hiding the sickly shade of his skin, the dark hallows under his eyes, the sharpness of his bones jutting through skin because he's lost so much weight lately. And Sam should have known. He should have fucking known.

"I don't know," Sam says. "I think – maybe." It feels like a betrayal to Dean, even admitting that much. "It might have been."

"He's talked about it before," Cas whispers. And he sounds ashamed. "When Dean had the Mark of Cain. He told me he wanted to die."

It isn't like it's new information. Still, Sam's stomach turns over. "He's, ah," it's hard to talk. Sam tries again. It's easier to not think about it. Just shut his eyes and say it all in a rush. "He's done it before, you know. For a hunt. I just – it's not like I didn't know he thought he was expendable. I just thought we'd gotten past that, you know? That maybe things would start getting better."

Because Sam's known for a long time. He's seen his brother taste it. Test the waters. There was those heart-stopping seven minutes when Cas was dead and they were investigating that sketchy asylum when Dean pulled out those fucking needles. And Sam hadn't even known Dean carried those things around with him, let alone where he'd gotten them from, what he'd been planning on doing with them.

And Sam still doesn't know what happened that time Sam got shot in the stomach by those werewolves and Dean thought he'd died. *When you thought I was dead, what did you do?* Sam found an injection site over Dean's heart the night after, when Dean was puking up his guts in the motel bathroom.

And it's not like Sam hasn't been repressing little shivers of fear every time Dean told him he was tired and Sam wondered if he meant something more. Like maybe *I'm tired* was code for *I want to die*. That first time when they both thought Sam'd been infected with the Croatoan virus and Dean insisted on sticking around in the hospital. That time with the Trials and Dean admitted that he didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel anymore. Just black.

"What are we –" Sam's talking before he knows it. He's crying again, too, but the tears are slow and quiet enough that he doesn't bother brushing them away. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

Cas doesn't answer. Sam looks up to find Cas standing by the head of Dean's bed. He has a hand on Dean's forehead and the other on Dean's arm, and he's frowning.

"I can't heal him, Sam," Cas whispers. His voice shakes. Sam can't tell if it's with tears or anger. "I can't – that's always been the worst thing about losing my Grace. That I can't help you anymore."

Sam knows, with sudden and violent certainty, that he can't be in this room for another minute. He thinks he manages to murmur something about *needing air* before he flees through the door like an absolute coward. He's trembling all over. His chest hurts. His clothes are too tight and hot. The air is too dry. It doesn't let enough oxygen into his lungs.

He fights the impulse to run down the hall, looking for anywhere he can find privacy. It's a small emergency clinic in the middle of nowhere, Kansas; it's not a long walk down the hallway from the ICU back to the emergency doors they came through. Sam passes swiftly through the doors, which open automatically to allow his exit, and he slips into the soft coolness of the April evening.

The sun hangs near the horizon, casting long shadows on the pavement, blushing the sky pink and orange. Sam's still shaking. He focuses on gulping lungsful of air. He can't afford to fall to pieces right now. It's not fair to Dean if – but Dean's lying lifeless on a hospital bed. Dean's covered in blood, slumped against a wall with a knife sticking out of his chest. Dean's kneeling in a pool of blood, breathing hard, staring blankly at the corpses on the ground. Dean's screaming himself out of a nightmare, yelling for Sam. Dean's holding a blade to Sam's neck. Dean's cocking a gun – Dean's begging Dad to stop –

Fuck.

Sam catches himself against a random car. He closes his eyes against the onslaught of memories. He remembers how Jess used to help him when he woke up from nightmares, even though she had no clue what his dreams meant back then. Neither of them did. She'd hold him, burry her nose into his chest, tell him she could hear his heart beating, she could count the beats. *Count them with me, baby.*

Sam's memories of Jess are still cut through with sorrow, but it's a softer grief now. At least the memories that weren't corrupted by Lucifer. They're fonder. Overlaid by the knowledge she might have been his first love, but he's old enough now to understand that losing

her didn't have to be the end of the world.

Shit.

Eileen.

Sam digs his phone out of his back pocket and sees he has eight missed texts. Only one is from Eileen; she's good at not freaking out. It's something Sam needs, he thinks: a level head. Six are from Jack. One is from Jody, who evidently also had six messages from Jack.

Sam sighs. He replies to Eileen first: *I'm sorry I didn't text sooner. We're at the hospital. Dean's ok* – Sam can't imagine telling her anything more over text, but she has to know. He deletes the Dean's ok part, and types instead: *Dean's going to be ok, but it's not great. Can you call? I'll be free to talk in a minute.*

Next, Sam checks Jody's message: *Jack called and asked if I'd heard from you boys. Everything ok?*

Sam thumbs back a quick message, ignoring the thud in his stomach that makes him think about Mom. *Dean's in the hospital. He'll be ok. Cas or I can call you in 20.*

The messages from Jack begin panicked, peter out to calm after Cas's call, and then get panicked again:

Did you find him? Dean hasn't called here. What's happening?

Hello? Are you getting these? Text me back! Do you need backup? Have you found Dean? Is he ok?

I'm calling Jody to see if she's heard from you. Text me!!!! Where are you?

Cas called. I'll wait here.

You sure you want me to wait here?

Sam? Maybe I should actually come. Maybe I can help.

So, Sam texts Jack back: *Stay at the bunker. It's ok. There's nothing to do here, anyway.*

By which time, his phone starts buzzing with an incoming video call from Eileen. Sam immediately swipes it open, and the relief at seeing Eileen's face on the screen is so immediate and intense Sam almost starts crying again.

“Hey,” he says weakly, not trusting his hands to sign anything.

“Sam?” Her eyebrows are furrowed in concern. “What happened? Is Dean alright?”

“He, ah,” Sam tries to unstick his throat. “He’s in the ICU, right now. He – stopped breathing.”

Eileen gets that look on her face, the one where she guesses Sam’s not telling her the whole truth, and Sam’s chest constricts painfully.

“Was he hurt?” Eileen says.

“He,” Sam takes a deep breath. “No. He drank too much,” he doesn’t know how to tell her about the pain meds. “And he – we found him in time. The doctor says he should be okay.”

“On purpose?” Eileen cuts right to the chase, and Sam swallows bile. Because of course she would ask. Of course, anyone would ask. It’s staring them right in the Goddamn face.

“We don’t know,” he says helplessly.

“Okay,” Eileen nods. She’s got her determined expression on, the one Sam’s seen her use to face down banshees, demons, and God, himself. “Where are you?”

“You don’t need to –”

“Sam,” she cuts him off. “Which hospital are you at?”

Sam doesn’t have the heart to fight her anymore on this. Besides, the idea of her being there with them makes something warm close around his heart, like maybe everything won’t feel so dreadful and frightening if she’s just there to hold his hand through it.

“Marysville,” he gives in. “Community Memorial.”

“Right,” she nods again. “I’ll be there in an hour. I’ll bring food. I’m guessing neither of you have eaten anything?”

“No,” Sam says sheepishly.

Eileen smiles. “It’ll be okay, Sam,” she promises him. Then she flashes him a sign for I love you, and, even though Sam’s fingers are still trembling, he can manage to sign it back to her.

There are three new messages on Sam's phone. Jody acknowledging Sam's message and her worry, Jack's defeated *ok*, and one from Cas: *the doctor is back. She wants to talk to you.*

It makes Sam's heart accelerate all over again, but talking to Eileen and knowing she's on her way helps steady him, so he heads back inside and makes his way through the hallways to Dean's room.

Sure enough, the doctor that worked on Dean before is standing inside the door with Cas. She's a woman in her mid-fifties, wearing glasses, holding a clipboard. Sam has seen so many doctors in his life that he'd recognize her earnest-but-sympathetic look anywhere.

"Mr. Campbell," she starts. "Your brother is doing well, given the circumstances."

"Good," Sam says, sensing the *but* in her voice.

"However, there are a few questions I would like to ask you. Privately. I wonder if your friend would like to wait in the…?"

"Cas can stay," Sam says at once, and Cas gives Sam a grateful look.

The doctor nods curtly. "Very well. Your brother came in with a 0.78% BAC. We estimate he ingested approximately 3,000 milligrams of Vicodin. The naloxone reversed the effects of the hydrocodone, and we've been administering acetylcysteine to help repair the damage to his liver caused by the acetaminophen. He is, in short, very lucky to be alive."

"Yeah," says Sam. He doesn't understand why he feels like she's reprimanding him. Like she's accusing Sam of being at fault, here. Like Sam should have fucking known. "Thanks for…yeah."

"I understand this is a very difficult time," the doctor continues. "But I do need to ask you some questions about your brother's medical history."

"Okay," Sam says. It feels a little bit like he's floating. Like he's in a free fall. But it's still far enough away from ground that he doesn't have to think about impact yet.

"Does your brother have a history of substance abuse?"

And it's tricky, because Sam gave them their Lebanon alias: Sam and Dean Campbell, so whatever Sam says now is going to end up on the

closest thing Dean's ever had to a permanent medical record. But it's not like Sam had a choice: Campbell is the only identity attached to any valid life insurance policy, one he and Dean took out when it first seemed like they'd settled in Lebanon for good, and it wouldn't be great to get tossed into jail because of credit card or insurance fraud so near a home base.

"He – um," Sam says.

"Yes," Cas interrupts unflinchingly. "He's an alcoholic."

The doctor nods. She makes a note on her clipboard.

"But the – the drugs," Sam says, not sure where the impulse to defend his brother's honor comes from, just knows that he's suddenly and frustratingly angry at Cas. "That's not – that's not something he does."

"So," the doctor cocks an eyebrow. "To the best of your knowledge, would you say that this was a suicide attempt?"

There it is. Free-falling and there it is. The ground. Just getting closer. Nothing Sam can do because he's not wearing a fucking parachute.

"I don't," Sam swallows. His saliva is thick. It won't go down. Cas is looking at him. This question, Sam knows, Cas won't answer unless Sam does first. "I don't know."

"I understand this is difficult, Mr. Campbell," she says gently. "But it's important for us to know. Your brother needs help."

"What would happen," Cas says slowly, "if we did think it was a…" It's like Cas can't say it, either.

The doctor looks at Cas for a minute before she sets aside her clipboard. "It would mean a mandatory seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold. I'm sorry," she adds sympathetically when she catches sight of something on Sam's face. "But it's protocol. Unfortunately, we don't have the facilities here. We'd have to transfer your brother to Kansas City."

"Oh," Sam says. That's more than two and a half hours from here. And in the opposite direction of home. Usually, he kind of likes the emptiness of where they live. Yeah, it could be lonely. But it was also calm. Now, it just feels isolated.

The doctor continues, "Unfortunately, that's not the biggest issue. The

fact is, during the seventy-two-hour hold, your brother will go into withdrawal. Depending on the severity of his addiction, it can be a very dangerous process. A hospital would be able to help him through it, but it is something to consider."

And Sam feels stupid. Because, yeah. Duh. Withdrawal. Because if Sam's going to face the idea that Dean's an alcoholic than he sure as hell better start facing the fact that helping Dean isn't going to be as simple as just asking him to cut back on the hard liquor.

"Right," Sam says.

"Does he have a history of treatment for alcoholism?" the doctor asks, like she's still trying to be sympathetic. Like talking about it is in any way going to help.

"I –"

"He's detoxed before," Cas cuts in again. "When he was in – before," he finishes lamely, and Sam realizes that Cas was going to say *when he was in Purgatory*.

And Sam just feels even more like a stupid piece of shit, like a poor excuse for a brother. Because of course Dean detoxed while he was in Purgatory. And of course Cas would know about it when Sam, Dean's own brother, doesn't. Because Sam had checked out that year. Hit a dog and moved in with Amelia and pretended like monsters and Purgatory and Dean were just part of some terrible nightmare.

"I didn't know it was this bad," Sam says stupidly, before he can stop himself.

"It's sometimes difficult to recognize in someone who you know very well," the doctor says understandingly. And her smile looks sad, but genuine. "Fortunately, this incident need only be a wakeup call. Not a tragedy."

"Yeah," Sam says. He can't say anything else. He tries, but no sound comes out.

The doctor looks from Sam to Cas. "I have several pamphlets about alcohol dependency," she offers softly. "Perhaps you two would like to discuss this?"

"That would be helpful," Cas says. "Thank you."

“Yeah,” Sam manages to say. “Yeah, thanks.”

She nods, and then she leaves, sneakers squeaking on the linoleum floor. Sam sinks into the chair closer to Dean’s bedside. Cas grabs the chair against the wall and drags it over so he can sit next to Sam.

“Sam…” Cas starts.

“Eileen is on her way,” Sam says, just to say something. Say anything so they don’t have to talk about this right now.

“Sam,” Cas says again, gently. “We should –”

“Dean will hate us,” Sam says fiercely. “Dean fucking hates hospitals. He’ll never forgive us if we send his ass –”

“And if we don’t?” Cas says. “Are your prepared to let this continue? What if next time –”

“There won’t be a fucking *next time,* Cas,” Sam snaps. “Shit.” And then he buries his head in his hands, digs the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees popping lights.

Cas doesn’t reply. A nurse walks in to hand them the pamphlets the doctor mentioned. The equipment hooked up to Dean continues to beep and whir rhythmically. Dean’s chest continues to rise and fall. And Sam tries hard not to think about all the times Dean stopped breathing. How badly he wants his brother around for at least another forty years. How desperately Dean’s earned a good, healthy, happy life.

And then Sam remembers he was supposed to call Jody with an update. It’s probably way passed his designated twenty minutes.

“I promised I’d tell Jody,” Sam mutters into his hands. He rouses himself from the chair. His legs feel like they’re made out of cement. His arms are each one-hundred pounds.

“I’ll be here,” says Cas. He has a hand on Dean’s leg. He’s staring at Dean’s face, as though his gaze alone is enough to wake him up.

Sam leaves and goes into the hall. He takes out his phone. Sure enough, there are a couple messages from Jody: *Sam? You’re worrying me now, kiddo.*

So, Sam presses in her number, puts the phone to his ear and listens to

barely one ring before Jody pounces on it.

“Sam?”

“Jody,” Sam says, hearing the tiredness in his voice, knowing it probably doesn’t do anything to absolve Jody’s worry.

“Are you boys alright?” she asks.

“We’re –” no. Fucking no. They’re not alright. Sam’s eyes sting again. And he hates it. Sam hates that his first impulse is always to cry. Why couldn’t he be more like Dean? Fucking hold himself together for more than five minutes. “Dean’s in the hospital.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jody says. “He hurt?”

“No,” Sam doesn’t understand why it’s so fucking difficult just to get the words out. “He – he just drank too much.” And it sounds so ridiculous, saying it like that.

But Jody doesn’t respond like it’s ridiculous. Instead, she goes deadly serious. “Sam, I’ve seen Dean when he drinks too much. What really happened?”

Sam gulps. He breathes slowly, but his exhale still trembles. “He,” he says finally, entire body going cold. “I think he tried to kill himself, Jody.”

Tried to kill himself. Dean tried to kill himself. The thought tumbles around in his brain, unconstrained. Sam misses Jody’s *Oh, Sam*. He misses her *I’m so sorry, kiddo*.

Jody asks if there’s anything she can do. Sam tells her no. She asks what Sam’s next steps are. Sam tells her he doesn’t know. Jody tells him that Dean needs help. Sam barely stops himself from yelling at her: *don’t you think I know that? What the fuck do you think I’m trying to do?*

But then Cas peaks his head out, tells Sam that Dean’s stirring, and Sam begs off the phone.

Sam’s back at Dean’s side in a second. Dean’s eyelids flutter. One arm twitches. Sam recognizes it as a kneejerk reaction to waking up in a strange place. If Dean was stronger or more alert, he’d probably be reaching for a weapon.

“Hey,” Sam says. He plants his hand on Dean’s shoulder, wanting to preempt any violent reactions. “Hey, man. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Dean’s eyes open halfway. He stares blearily up at Sam’s face. He moves his lips to speak, but his eyebrows knit in confusion when he can’t. Sam sees the flash of fear hit Dean’s eyes when he recognizes the fact there’s a tube down his throat. Dean gags. His breathing hitches.

Dean lifts his arm, but Sam catches Dean’s hand, stills it. Dean’s eyes widen immediately in panic at the idea of being restrained, and Sam’s stomach twists.

“It’s okay,” Sam says quickly. “Leave it where it is. Try not to fight the ventilator, man.”

But telling Dean not to fight something is like trying to stop a freight train. Dean’s throat spasms. His pupils blow wide with fear. The heartbeat monitor starts beeping faster. Dean tries to wrench his hand away from Sam’s grip, and Sam moves his hand off Dean’s shoulder to press firmly on his chest, trying to stop him from sitting up.

“Dean, calm down,” Sam tries to keep his voice level. “It’s okay. It’s helping, man. Cas –” Sam looks over his shoulder at Cas, but Cas is already moving. He presses his finger to the nurse call button. Then he steps around Dean’s bed, goes to the other side where he’s crammed in beside all the equipment, but able to get closer to Dean. He leans over, puts a hand close to Dean’s forehead, brushing skin with just the tips of his two fingers, like again he’s begging himself to be able to heal Dean.

“You’re safe,” he whispers to Dean. Dean’s eyes swivel from Sam to Cas, latch onto the angel’s face. “Your brother is here. I am here. I promise you’re safe, Dean.”

Dean’s throat bobs as he tries to swallow. He stops fighting Sam quite as desperately, and Sam pumps his hand. Dean’s fingers close around Sam’s hand in response. He squeezes hard, doesn’t let go.

The nurse breezes in with a smile, “Hello, love,” she says, gently nudging Sam aside so she can get to Dean’s side. “Happy to see you’re awake.” Dean’s eyes track the nurse as she bends over his bed, checks something on his monitors, reaches for his blanket to pull it up higher on his chest.

Dean flinches hard when she touches him. The nurse drops the

blanket, raises her hands to shoulder height, and gives him another smile.

“My name’s Amber. It’s alright, love. Just here to help.”

“He – ah,” Sam searches for some kind of explanation, keeping ahold of Dean’s hand even though his brother’s fingernails are biting painfully into the back of his fist. And Sam knows it must be bad, if Dean’s willingly holding hands right now. “He doesn’t like hospitals.”

Amber clucks her tongue sympathetically. “I’m sorry,” she tells Dean. “I know you’re uncomfortable, but the ventilator needs to stay where it is for a little while longer. We need to get your respiratory system back up to snuff, first.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Dean’s eyes go wide. He looks to Cas, then to Sam. He’s shaking and pale. He tries to sit up again.

“Shhh, Dean,” Cas soothes, but his voice isn’t enough to snap Dean out of it, this time. Dean tries to move his free hand up to his face, but Cas catches it.

Dean squirms. He makes a small, strangled sound that might have been a sob if it wasn’t for the tube in his throat. Cas brings Dean’s hand up close to his face, so close his lips nearly brush Dean’s knuckles, and Sam feels something deep inside him ache. The movement is so intimate, Sam might as well have walked in on his brother and Cas in bed.

I love your brother.

“It’s alright, Dean,” Cas whispers against Dean’s fingers. “We’re here.”

Dean shudders. He shuts his eyes. Falls heavily against the bed in what’s clearly exhaustion and not surrender.

“I’m going to give you a sedative, alright?” Amber says softly. “It’s going to help you calm down.”

Amber moves to fiddle with Dean’s IV bag. She turns to Sam, still smiling. “Try to keep him quiet. If he needs anything else, don’t hesitate to call.”

Sam realizes he hasn’t said anything in a long time. His tongue feels heavy. He nods, and Amber leaves.

What the nurse gave Dean is already working. The beeping of his heart monitor slows to a steadier rhythm. His grip on Sam's hand relaxes slightly. But when he opens his eyes again, his lashes are beaded with unshed tears.

"You're going to be alright, Dean," Sam says. His throat aches. "We're going to get you out of here as soon as possible." Across the bed, Cas looks at Sam sharply, eyebrows furrowed, but Sam ignores him. He's made his decision. Dean needs to be home. And Sam's going to get him there.

OOO

Three months before

"I must have passed out," Eileen explains after, she, too, is sitting at the kitchen table, armed with her own glass of whiskey and a damp paper towel she holds interchangeably from one ear to the other. "When I came to, they were gone. I tried to call, but I couldn't reach you."

"Yeah, well," Dean says with a shrug. His worry for Sam is like a palpable thing: it's flooded his entire body so that's all he can think about. He feels strangely detached. His body is crammed full of anxiety and his mind is just free floating, grappling for whatever else he's supposed to focus on. "That's because we were both in Purgatory."

"You went to Purgatory?" Eileen says. And then she sighs. "As soon as this is over, we really need to work on our communication."

It makes something grow warm inside Dean's chest, mostly because Eileen, at least, still believes there will be a time someday when this is all over. And maybe that means she believes they'll get Sammy back in one piece, too.

"Am I allowed to know why you were in Purgatory?" Eileen asks.

"To get this," Cas says. He gestures to the collection of bowls in front of him. He's currently smashing the leviathan blossom into a thick paste with Dean's spice grinder, which irks Dean slightly because they have their own separate tools for spells and stuff; they don't have to use the good ones Dean got for cooking. "Michael has already prepared the rest of our ingredients. Once we add the blossom, we'll simply need to find God –"

“Yeah, simply,” Dean snorts. And suddenly the sheer magnitude of their task threatens to overwhelm him, because God is fucking God, and now he’s got Sammy. “Speaking of Michael, where the hell is that son of a bitch?”

“I had some family matters to attend to,” Michael appears in the center of the kitchen and Dean nearly falls of his chair with a muffled “Shit!”

But then there’s a rush of familiar energy, and Dean feels a tug within his stomach that he hasn’t felt in years: somewhere between undeniable, animal-like yearning and deep repulsion, and he doesn’t need to look to see who Michael decided to bring along.

“Dean,” says Amara with a smile that makes Dean’s skin erupt into gooseflesh. “Good to see you again.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months before

“I don’t want her to fucking be here,” Dean says, and he doesn’t remember how he got from the kitchen to his room, but when he turns on his heel, he finds Cas in the doorway, pale and leaning against the door jam. “Why the fuck does it have to be her?”

And Dean’s being stupid, because he knows why it has to be her – because there’s no way in hell they’re going to be able to face Chuck on their own. But he doesn’t want to deal with Amara right now. He doesn’t want to deal with the way she makes him feel whenever she’s near him, the constant twisting, half-arousal in his stomach, the paranoia that she can somehow see everything he’s thinking and know how he fucking feels about her.

“Dean,” Cas says, eyebrows furrowed. He’s never been super good at the whole sympathetic look. Mostly he ends up just looking confused. “This is the best chance we’ve got.”

“Fuck,” Dean says through his teeth. He shuts his eyes and just tries to breathe, because he can feel everything building inside his chest, and he can’t afford to fall apart. Not when Sam’s –

“We’re going to win, Dean,” Cas says. Dean knows that isn’t a Cas kind of thing to say; that’s a Sam kind of thing to say, but Dean’s grateful to Cas for trying to channel his brother’s optimism, anyway.

“Yeah.” Dean opens his eyes. He swallows. “Let’s get this show on the fucking road, then.”

OOO

Present day

There is something lodged inside Cas’s chest. He has been stabbed multiple times, so he knows the feeling. It’s like a blade inside his heart that twists a little deeper every time he breathes. He recognizes it as many things: sadness, exhaustion, yearning, worry. Mostly worry.

He knows now what humans mean by the expression *sick with worry*. Worry is a physical illness inside of him: bubbling and hot in his stomach.

Sam didn't look at the pamphlets the nurse gave them last night, but Cas did. He brought them back to the bunker with him, after Eileen showed up with food and the nightshift nurse finally kicked them out.

So, Cas read all about alcohol dependence, ticked off the warning signs in Dean, even though he already knew Dean was an alcoholic, and had been for a while, and he doesn't understand why it's come as such a shock to Sam: *you may be at a greater risk for alcohol use disorder if you have a parent with alcohol use disorder, a mental health problem, such as depression or anxiety, experience a high level of stress, live in a culture where alcohol use is common and accepted.*

Cas doesn't know what to do to help Dean. He knows Sam is just as clueless. And Cas doesn't know how to address the fact that maybe allowing Dean to come back to the bunker isn't the best idea. Cas understands that neither of the brothers has ever been comfortable staying in a hospital, but perhaps it is the case that, this time, a longer stay is necessary.

People with alcohol use disorder may engage in the following behaviors: drinking alone, drinking more to feel the effects of alcohol, becoming violent or angry when asked about their drinking habits, not eating or eating poorly, neglecting personal hygiene, being unable to control alcohol intake, making excuses to drink.

The doctors, maybe, would be able to help Dean in a way that Sam and Cas cannot.

But Sam's set his heart on bringing Dean home, and once a Winchester makes up his mind, there was very little point in trying to budge him.

So, Cas nodded along when Sam lied to the doctor about the overdose being an accident, even though they both knew it hadn't been. And, that night, Cas helped Sam purge the bunker of every bottle and drop of alcohol they could find. And Cas drove back to the hospital with Sam early the next morning to pick up Dean.

Eileen stayed home, as did Jack. Cas knows there are precious few people in the world Dean allows to see him weak. Eileen and Jack aren't on that list. Sam and Cas are.

It isn't something Cas takes lightly. Even given what had…happened

between them the other night. Cas is still Dean's friend. Dean called him his *best friend* more than once, and Cas isn't going to walk away from that. Not again.

Dean's off the ventilator and moved out of the ICU by the time they get to the hospital. He's propped up in bed, skin almost gray beside the white sheets. He isn't asleep – Cas knows that right away – but he keeps his eyes closed when Cas walks in. Cas sees him swallow. He sees his shoulders tense.

Sam is at the desk, talking Dean's doctor into releasing him early. But Cas suddenly wishes Sam was with him; it would be easier to face Dean with someone else by his side.

"Dean?"

Dean hums weakly in reply. He cracks an eyelid. "Hey," he croaks. His voice is rough. His throat is probably sore from the tube.

Treatment may occur in stages and can include the following: detoxification or withdrawal to rid your body of alcohol, rehabilitation to learn new coping skills and behaviors, counseling to address emotional problems that may cause you to drink.

Cas hovers in the doorway. "Are you…alright?" It's a ridiculous question, and Cas is a fool for asking it. But he doesn't know what else to say. Not when all he can remember is waking up next to Dean in bed, feeling his lips –

No. No, it isn't fair for Cas to think about it. Not when what happened obviously distressed Dean so much that he –

"Fine," Dean murmurs. He stares at his hands. Opens and closes his fingers. "Sammy getting me out of this hellhole?" he asks, in an obvious attempt to sound normal. Instead, he just sounds flat.

"He," Cas clears his throat. "Yes."

"Good," Dean breathes. He sounds exhausted. Unease stirs in Cas's chest. Leaving is a bad idea. Dean needs *help*. Cas and Sam are so far outside of their element.

"We brought you a change of clothes," Cas says, and hoists the plastic grocery bag of Dean's clothes at his side. He did a load of Dean's laundry the night before, when he couldn't sleep. He's still not very adept at using the machine. He was worried he wouldn't get it right.

But, aside from a few wrinkles and lost socks, it all came out okay.

“Thanks,” Dean says.

“Dean –” Cas starts, not sure where he’s going to end up.

“Did you –” Dean interrupts, looking up for the first time. His eyes are red. His face looks skeletal. “Did you get the car?”

“We picked it up on the way here,” Cas breathes.

“Good,” Dean says. He looks at his hands again. Picks at the sheets. Cas can see his fingers are trembling, an almost imperceptible tremor that’s present nearly all the time, now. It gets worse when Dean’s nervous, Cas knows. When he feels unsafe.

Delirium tremens (DT, also called alcohol withdrawal delirium) is a severe complication. Left untreated, it can be fatal in up to 20% of patients. Signs and symptoms, such as hypertension, agitation, disorientation, tachycardia, diaphoresis, and low-grade fever, may arise within 2 to 4 days after the last drink and persist for 3 to 5 days. Without treatment, up to 25% of alcohol-dependent patients may experience grand mal seizures during the first day of alcohol cessation.

Cas remembers last night, taking Dean’s hand, putting his lips to his knuckles and breathing meaningless, desperate comfort into his skin. The movement had been instinctual. Something Cas couldn’t possibly pull himself back from. In the future, he’d need to be more careful.

There are footsteps behind Castiel, and he turns to see Sam in the hallway. Sam stops dead when he sees his brother. He’s holding a clipboard in his hands. He sets his jaw.

“Hey, Dean,” he says brightly, as if it was just any morning and Dean had just ambled into the bunker kitchen.

Are they not going to talk about it? Is this what happens now? They all go about their business – pretend it never happened? Cas feels something like anger bubble in his stomach, and he doesn’t understand. Why would he be angry?

Dean lifts his chin, looks at Sam quickly. “Hiya, Sammy.”

“Just need your signature, man,” says Sam. He crosses the room and holds out the clipboard. It takes Dean a minute to get his fingers around the pen. Cas sees Sam’s eyes on his brother’s hands, but no one

says anything.

“Fucking finally,” Dean quips. He sits up gingerly in bed. Most of the tubes and monitors are off already. He unclips the oxygen monitor from his finger. He slowly swings his legs off the hospital bed. Cas can see him trying to keep his head steady; Dean likely has what he would describe as a bitch of a headache.

You may need to seek treatment at an inpatient facility if your addiction to alcohol is severe. These facilities will provide you with 24-hour care as you withdraw from alcohol and recover from your addiction.

“You, ah,” Sam hesitates. His hand is half-way stretched toward Dean, evidently unsure if he should offer him help. “You need…”

“Just…” Dean chews on his lips. Cas watches what little color he’s gained drain out of his face again as the change in position hits him. “Fuck.”

That’s Sam’s cue. He grabs hold of Dean’s upper arm, hauls him steadily to his feet. Dean sways for a minute, shuts his eyes and looks like he’s in pain, but he takes a deep breath and nods. “I’m fine.”

Sam leaves his hand on Dean’s arm. He looks at Cas meaningfully and Cas startles. There were still times, occasionally, when Cas found himself drifting, when it came as a surprise to find that he was corporeal, not simply a multidimensional wavelength of celestial intent.

Cas takes a step further into the room, feeling unbearably like he’s intruding, and hands over the bag of clothes to Sam.

“I will,” Cas says. He feels clumsy and stupid. Just as awkward in his skin as he first had during those horrible weeks when he had to navigate earth for the first time as a purely mortal human. “I will just wait outside.”

And then he leaves, letting Sam stay behind to help Dean get dressed.

OOO

Cas leaves. Sam stays, and he’s still got his hand wrapped around Dean’s elbow like a vice, like he thinks there’s anyway in hell Dean’s going to let his brother help him get dressed.

“Get off me,” Dean says. He ignores the fact he’s still shaking. Ignores

how dizzy he is. How his stomach is wound tight into a hard, aching ball. How his head feels empty and too heavy all at once. He feels untethered and strange. He keeps having to remind himself that he's at a hospital. He can't remember how he got there.

Sam releases Dean's elbow, takes a step back. Stands there looking worried.

"Just," Dean doesn't know what he was going to say. "Just…fuck." And he holds his hand out for the bag of clothes. The movement unsteadies him. He makes the decision to sit back on the hospital bed instead of falling on his face. He thinks he makes it look partially natural.

"Dean," Sam says carefully. "We don't have to leave."

Dean doesn't respond. He shoots Sam a look, one that he's perfected over the years that means *shut your mouth*. He pulls out a pair of boxers and sweatpants from the bag, slips them on while staying seated. His clothes smell fresh and clean. It's been a while since he's gotten around to laundry, and it makes him uneasy to know either Cas or Sam went digging around in his room to get his clothes.

Then he strips off the hospital gown, pulls on a t-shirt, by which time he's breathing hard and shivering. It's weirdly cold in the hospital; Dean can feel it creeping into his bones. He looks into the bag and is glad to see Cas packed a sweatshirt. He pulls it on quickly. When he lifts his head again, Sam's in the process of kneeling on the floor, Dean's shoes in hand.

"I'm not a fucking kid, Sam," Dean huffs, kicking his brother away. Sam stays where he is.

"You can barely stand, Dean," Sam says. His tone is strange: almost cold. It makes Dean feel uneasy. It makes him remember that bridge in the pouring rain and *I'm poison* and *I'm not going to stop you*. And Dean can take a lot of things: yelling and hitting and firing guns, but the one thing he's never been able to take from his brother is indifference.

Dean concentrates on not being sick as Sam helps him with his socks and boots, tying the laces like Dean's some damn kindergartener. And Dean remembers teaching Sammy how to tie his shoes: *like this. Sammy, like this. The fox chases the rabbit. Around the tree and into the hole. Like this*.

Dean feels small and silly. He wishes he hadn't woken up. He wishes this wasn't happening right now.

"Alright," says Sam, getting up and taking Dean's elbow again, in a way that tells Dean he isn't going to let him pull away. "Let's go."

Cas waits for them in the hallway. No one's saying anything. The silence is oppressive; it makes it difficult for Dean to draw breath. He manages to shake off Sam's hand as soon as they get outside, and he walks to the car under his own power. The Impala waits for him, glinting in the sun, and Dean's not stupid enough to think Sammy's going to let him drive, so he goes to the passenger seat.

Cas says something to Sam before pealing off to his truck, but he doesn't say anything to Dean, and Dean doesn't…he doesn't know what to do with that information. He doesn't know whether he's glad or upset he doesn't have to deal with Cas right now.

Mostly, he sort of wishes it was Cas driving him home, instead of Sammy. It might be –

Easier.

Silence with Sam always feels rough and accusing. With Cas it feels more comfortable. Cas, maybe, wouldn't ask a whole lot of damn questions.

Sam climbs behind the wheel without a word. He starts the car, glances at Dean, and turns on the heat even though it's a mild April morning and the sun's warmed the air inside the car. But Dean's still shaking. He pulls his arms over his chest, tries to stop his teeth from chattering.

"You gonna sleep?" Sam asks as they pull out behind Cas onto the road.

"No," Dean grunts. Even though he's exhausted. It's a marrow-deep kind of tired. A physical weight on Dean's arms and legs, pressing against his chest and refusing to let his lungs inflate all the way.

"I have to make a couple stops. Get your prescriptions filled," says Sam. Dean's stomach squirms. He hadn't thought about drugs. He was just focused on getting out. "And get you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," Dean says quickly. His nurse made him eat oatmeal that morning, threatened to make him stay another day if he didn't. It

sat like a rock inside his stomach. The Impala bumps across a pothole in the road, and Dean swallows bile.

Sam doesn't respond. He's watching the road. His jaw is squared. Dean wonders if he gives himself headaches, all the clenching teeth he does.

They drive in silence for several minutes. Eventually, Sam signals off the highway and they let Cas drive ahead. Sam pulls off at the first pharmacy to fill whatever prescriptions the doctor gave him.

Dean waits in the car. They're still a half hour from the bunker, and all Dean wants to do is get home, crawl into his own bed, sleep for a couple days. Maybe shower because his skin feels gross: too loose on his bones. There are things crawling in his hair. And he wants something to drink. Just a little whiskey. One or two sips.

One or two sips and then he'll stop. Just until his head goes quiet.

Sam gets back into the car. He puts a plastic bag on the bench between them; it rattles. Dean reaches for it, pulls out a couple bottles. One is fluid: acetylcysteine. The other is pills: valium.

"What the fuck, man?" Dean asks.

"You screwed up your liver, Dean," Sam says. And nothing else. That wasn't what Dean meant, and Sam knows it.

Dean wants to insist that Sam provide him some kind of Goddamn answers, but there's a vein jumping in Sam's jaw. So, Dean settles heavily into his seat, chews on his bottom lip, tries to stymie the rising panic in his belly. Dean would almost rather an endless stream of questions than this torturous, heavy silence.

Sam pulls up to a McDonald's drive through.

"Can you handle a milkshake?" he asks, not waiting for Dean's answer. "You need calories."

Fine. Whatever. Fuck this. Dean can do the silent treatment, too. Sam rolls down the window to make his order. He asks for a milkshake, two cheeseburgers, and fries. The smell of the grease makes Dean's stomach turn over. He knows he should eat. He's only had oatmeal, coffee, and booze, over the past forty-eight hours. But the thought of actually swallowing anything makes him gag.

He chews on the end of the milkshake straw. The cup is cold. It's hard

to get his hand to grip it correctly. He takes a sip and the liquid slips sluggishly down his throat, lands like an ice cube in his belly. Make his head pound.

The Impala rolls off the entrance ramp back onto the highway, and suddenly Dean can't hold it back anymore.

"Sammy –" he gulps, grasping for the door handle. Sam doesn't waste time on words, just shoves the car onto the side of the road.

Dean opens the door. The movement unbalances him, and then he's tipping out of the car. He lands hard on all fours, scraping his palm against the gravel and broken glass on the side of the road. The sunlight glaring off a broken bottle hurts Dean's eyes. He stares at old cigarette butts as he retches. Nothing comes up; there's not enough in his stomach.

He hates this. He fucking hates this.

He can't stop shaking and he doesn't understand what the fuck is wrong with him and he just fucking hates this. Wants it to stop. Wants it to go away.

Sam's hand finds Dean's back, rubs comforting circles, but he doesn't say anything. Dean wishes he would. Dean wishes he would just fucking get it over with already.

"You done?" Sam asks finally, when Dean's finally just gasping and trembling. His stomach cramps painfully around empty air. He's familiar with the sensation; it's the same thing that happened after he OD'd in that clinic four years ago. When Sammy was dead. Wasn't dead. Whatever.

"Yeah," Dean breathes. He wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his hoodie. He isn't entirely sure he can get up on his own, but he doesn't know how to possibly communicate that to Sam.

But, apparently just staying on the ground is enough, because Sam sighs and slides across the seat, plants his feet on the ground and wraps his hands under Dean's arms, hauls him back into the Impala like Dean's some kind of stupid sack of meat. Pointless. Fucking dead weight.

Sam reaches across Dean to shut the door behind him, then he slides back behind the wheel and restarts the car.

Dean crams himself against the door. If there was enough room, he'd curl into a ball. He wants out. Out of the fucking car and away from Sam. Just out.

"This isn't happening again," Sam says quietly.

And Dean knows what he's talking about. He doesn't know what the fuck he's supposed to say, how he's supposed to explain. Because there is no way in hell Sam is going to believe him. Dean's smart enough to know what this looks like, and there's no way he can begin to explain how it had just been an accident.

Just a fucking accident.

One second he was drinking and the next second he'd had the pills and it just felt like a fucking great idea. So simple. So easy. It wasn't like he'd

"You know that, right?" Sam continues, still in that soft voice: half-way kind, half-way firm. Mostly like he's talking to a little kid, or someone on their death bed.

It feels like three years ago, when Dean needed to talk to the ghosts in the asylum, and stopping his heart was just the shortest solution. And, anyway, Cas was dead and Mom was gone and Sam was taking care of the whole Jack situation, so what the fuck was the point anymore, anyway? And on the ride home, after Dean finally confessed to Sam that, no, he wasn't okay. He probably wouldn't ever be okay, again, Sam asked him, *promise me you won't do that again*. And Dean knew he was lying when he said, *okay, Sammy*.

Dean swallows. His throat still hurts from that damn tube. He stares out the window, watches the featureless Kansas landscape sweep by.

"You know things need to change," Sam adds. "And I'm sorry, man." He doesn't sound sorry. He sounds exasperated. Sick of Dean's shit. Yeah, well join the fucking club. "I should have done something sooner."

Dean doesn't know what to say. His chest aches and his throat closes up. He shuts his eyes, opens his lips, and what comes out is, "Fuck off, Sam."

And he didn't really mean it. But it hangs in the car, staticky in the silence. Sam doesn't say anything back. They pull onto the access road that leads to the bunker. Sam peals off down the hidden drive toward

the garage.

Cas's truck is already waiting for them. Maybe Cas is inside, setting up some kind of ambush. Dean doesn't wait for Sam to pull the lever into park before he swings his door open. He musters whatever strength he has left to get out of the seat, uses his momentum to take his first steps toward the door.

The low light hurts Dean's head, makes weird shadows flicker across his vision. He has a strange feeling that something's watching him from the corner of the room, waiting for him to stumble so it can pounce.

Dean hears Sam get out of the car, hears his gargantuan feet pound behind him. Dean's knees almost buckle, but he catches himself against one of the pillars holding up the ceiling. And maybe the pillar will crumble. Maybe the roof will cave in.

Dean swallows air, trying to muster his strength, mapping his plan of action because he can't let Cas or Eileen or Kevin – fuck no.

Not Kevin. Kevin's dead. Dean killed him.

Can't let Jack see him like this.

"Dean –" Sam says, and Dean can feel the air change as Sam reaches for his arm. Can feel it crackle and prickle against Dean's body. It makes gooseflesh rise on his arms. And Sam's hands are wrong. Flat and weird. Everything looks one-dimensional.

"Don't touch me," Dean mumbles. His lips don't work correctly. He can't feel his fingers.

He shoves off the wall, tries to take another step, but then the floor tilts. Something strong and steady hooks under his arm and stops him from crashing to his knees.

Sam pulls Dean's arm over his shoulder, practically drags him the rest of the way to the door.

"I've got you, Dean," Sam says heavily. He braces one arm around Dean's back, wraps the other around Dean's stomach. He sounds so tired. Because Dean's such a fucking burden. Such a fucking waste of space.

They make it into the bunker. The air inside is cool and dry and stale.

It shrivels up Dean's lungs. Makes his skin crack and bleed.

Cas is waiting for them just inside and he jumps forward to help, face all white and eyes hallowed with worry. "What happened?" he rasps.

"Let's set him up in the infirmary," Sam says.

And no. No. Because Dean hates fucking hospitals and he wants to go back to his room. He just needs to sleep this off. In the morning he'll be okay.

"Let –" Dean can't fucking talk. There's something around his windpipe, squeezing. "Let me go."

No one lets him go, so Dean digs his feet into the ground, and adrenaline surges with his panic, filling him with sudden clarity: he knows how to break their hold on them. Dad taught him how to get away from people he didn't want to touch him.

Dean swings his arm off Sam's shoulder, cuffs his brother on the back of the head, uses Sam's momentary confusion to duck away from him, ends up pitching to the side when his brain slides listlessly inside his skull. His shoulder connects with Cas's chest. They both careen toward the wall, and Cas exhales with an "oof" of surprise.

But instead of releasing Dean, Cas wraps his arms around Dean's chest. Steadies him. Stops them both from slipping to the ground. Cas's face ends up in Dean's neck.

"Let us help you, Dean," Cas says, and his breath on his skin makes Dean shiver. Makes something tighten in chest.

I would have paid for it, whore.

He doesn't want – he doesn't need help. He wants them to go away. He doesn't want to cry, but there's something burning his eyes, tickling the back of his throat.

"P-please," Dean whimpers, not sure what he's begging for.

Sam is back. He's more careful where he grabs Dean this time, telegraphing his movements slowly. He grips one arm, and, on Dean's other side, Cas grabs the other. They lead him down the hall.

Dean's lost track of where they're going. His head spins. The walls spiral around him. He shuts his eyes because the vertigo is making

acid rise in his throat.

“Here, man,” Sam says kindly, and the world tips again as Dean’s lowered onto something soft. He recognizes the slightly musty sent of the infirmary beds. The mattress is uncomfortable: all springs and soft where it’s supposed to be firm, too hard where it’s supposed to be soft, and Dean wants this bed. He wants his room. He wants to be left alone.

There are hands on his feet, unlacing and pulling off his boots. Dean turns on his side, draws his knees toward his chest. He wants them to go away. Too many hands and too many eyes, and this was how it always started: like Dean was some kind of interesting scientific specimen, ready to be vivisected.

Alastair stood over him with a knife and explained to his latest pupil how to hold the blade, how to touch the edge just so to the flesh so it only sliced through skin, didn’t damage the organs below because that was where the fun would begin.

Would you like to see your heart, Deano? See how hard it’s beating.

Dean’s pulse races in his head. He’s shuddering, even though he isn’t even cold anymore. Sweat slithers down the sides of his face. Something wipes across his forehead.

“Dean?” Sammy says uncertainly from the darkness above him. “Can you sit up, man? You should take some meds. They’ll help.”

Dean doesn’t know when he shut his eyes, doesn’t know for how long he’s been lying there, but when he opens his eyes, Sammy’s swimming above him. Cas is a white-faced shadow by the side of the bed.

“Mmh no, Sammy,” Dean says. He licks his lips. There’s blood in his mouth; he can taste it. Blood on his fingers. He remembers what his heart looks like.

Someone cups the back of Dean’s head, gently eases it upward. Sam holds out a glass of something bubbly and a little white pill.

“It’s ginger ale,” Sam explains softly, still like Dean’s just a dumb kid. “It’ll help with nausea, okay?”

Sammy’s eyes are dark and wet. He looks so damn worried. And Sammy isn’t supposed to be worried, so Dean does what he says. He forces the pill down, then he takes a couple sips of the ginger ale. It’s

too sweet. It hurts his mouth and burns his throat going down.

Makes him think of whiskey.

And alcohol will make it stop. Dean knows. Somewhere in the back of his mind he is dead-certain that what's happening to him is withdrawal. He's been here before, after all, surrounded by the smell of rot and death in purgatory, not sure which monsters were real and which ones were just part of his fevered mind.

And he doesn't want it to happen again. Panic cramps in his stomach. It fills his brain with white-hot fear.

"Sammy, p-please," he says around a sob. It gets stuck in his throat. Swollen and throbbing.

Sam frowns. He looks so fucking unhappy, and Dean doesn't know what to do to make it better.

"I'm sorry, Dean," he says. He grips Dean's shoulder. "I know it sucks. I know."

And maybe Sammy's thinking about iron walls and salted air, a massive fan spinning shadows onto the floor, and Sammy screaming, writhing, begging in that damn panic room as Dean knocked the back of his head against the wall and prayed for it to stop.

"But I'm not leaving," Sammy whispers. "I promise."

OOO

Three months before

"You're scared," Sam says to Chuck. "That's why you're doing this. You need us to stop because you're scared we'll actually succeed. And for some reason you can't just destroy the world with a snap of your fingers, or you would have done it already."

"Sam, I would love for the chance to catch up," Chuck says. He looks ugly. And Sam's disgusted by the fact that he ever found anything at all awe-inspiring about the man. *I fucking prayed to you, you bastard.* "But do us both a favor, and shut up."

An invisible hand presses itself against Sam's mouth. Sam sputters. But then the pressure abruptly lifts, and Sam can move his jaw again. He swallows several times in surprise, and he meets Chuck's eyes. The

flash of horror in Chuck’s eyes is so quick it’s like it never existed.

“What the hell?” Sam gasps. And he can tell by the blank expression on Chuck’s face, that he’s thinking the exact same thing.

Chapter End Notes

> So, I just figured out that the formatting on AO3 might be messing a little with this story...if there's a strange transition or what looks like a missing chunk of text, can y'all let me know? I think I caught the couple moments where it happened (one of which was the moment where Cas has his big "I love your brother" confession to Sam and, like, really? Really? You couldn't have screwed it up at any other point, AO3?).
>
> Muchas gracias.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Present day

“I’m not leaving, Dean,” Sam whispers. He doesn’t mean for it to be a reprimand. He knows – he *knows* – that Dean, Cas, and Bobby had to leave him alone when he was detoxing demon blood. After all, the blood gave him the ability to move and destroy things with his mind. He very easily could have killed someone if he wasn’t alone in the panic room while he was drying out.

Still. It’s hard to forget the frantic terror, the terrible sense of abandonment he’d felt during those hours. He won’t let Dean go through that, if he can help it.

He keeps his hand on Dean’s shoulder. Dean’s still curled on his side, shaking despite the several blankets Cas pulled over his body. Cas is sitting across the bed from Sam, but Sam might as well have not been in the room for all the attention Cas is giving him. Cas is staring at Dean’s face like he could bore holes into him with his mind. He has a damp cloth in his hand, one he occasionally uses to wipe the sweat and tears away from Dean’s face.

“He – um,” Sam clears his throat. Cas finally looks up. “You said he’s done this before?”

Cas blinks slowly. It appears to take a while for Sam’s question to penetrate his mind. Sam knows that Cas, like himself, got very little sleep the night before. “Yes,” Cas answers. “In Purgatory.”

“And you were, ah,” Sam says. He still doesn’t know half of what went down in Purgatory. He’s come to terms with the fact that that year is just something Dean’s never going to talk openly about. “You were with him?”

Cas’s face falls. Sam immediately regrets asking. “No,” Cas says tightly. He looks back at Dean.

From down the hall, Sam can make out the sounds of Eileen and Jack in the kitchen. Sam had made sure they stayed out of the way when Cas and he first brought in Dean. Sam knew how badly Dean would

hate spectators.

Sam tries not to think about the fact that, if Cas wasn't with Dean when he detoxed in Purgatory, it means that Dean must have told him about it later. And that thought rankles, even though Sam knows it shouldn't. Because, of course, Dean's allowed to tell Cas things that he doesn't tell Sam.

"I left him," Cas says quietly. "At the time, it felt like the best thing to do. To protect him. But now…"

Sam doesn't need Cas to continue, because he knows that guilt well enough on his own. It makes his chest burn, to think about Dean alone – truly alone – in Purgatory for so long. Abandoned by his brother and his best friend. No wonder Benny had turned into such a lifeline.

Lucifer was right: leaving Dean in Purgatory to shack up with Amelia was one of the worst things Sam's ever done in his life. And it's not fair. It's not fucking fair, because, yeah, Sam can recognize now that a lot of things about his and Amelia's relationship hadn't been healthy, and they'd probably been riding for a fall: they moved too fast and depended on each other for all the wrong reasons. She thought Sam could replace Don and Sam thought Amelia could replace Dean. Building a relationship on the cornerstone of mutual trauma was never a good idea.

But, still, it had also been the first Goddamn time since Stanford that Sam finally did something for *himself* instead of for family or loyalty or the good of the world or whatever. And it had felt good. It felt okay. Like he'd finally managed to cut his apron strings and move on.

Isn't that what psychologists talk about? Self-reliance. Independence. Advocating for his own well-being for a change. Wasn't that what Dr. Fuller told him and Dean when they were on that wraith case for Martin? *To be frank the relationship that you have with your brother seems dangerously codependent. I think a little time apart will do you both good.*

And now it's happening again. Because Dean, despite his encouragement, obviously sees Eileen as just another Amelia, just another excuse for Sam to walk away. And, even though Dean will deny it, Sam knows that this is Sam's fault. That him leaving the bunker with Eileen is what started Dean down on his spiral.

"Sammy?" Dean stirs. His eyelids flutter. The valium took him out for a little while, but he's still breathing too hard and fast, twitching

occasional and muttering under his breath like he's in the middle of a fever dream.

"I'm here, man," Sam says at once.

"You gotta…" Dean says. He pushes feebly against the mattress to roll himself onto his back. "Gotta make sure…that Dad…okay? Okay, Sammy?"

Sam gulps. "Yeah, okay, Dean." He looks up at Cas, but the angel is still staring wordlessly at Dean.

Cas bites his lip, smooths his hand across Dean's forehead. "Try to sleep, Dean," he says.

"Cas?" Dean whispers. His eyes track groggily across the room. When they land on Cas's face, he can't seem to focus. "You left. You – Cas?"

"I'm not leaving, Dean," Cas says.

Dean groans and throws his arm over his eyes. "F-fucking hurts," he says.

"Dean," says Sam. He grabs the half-glass of ginger ale from the bedside table and brings it to Dean's lips. Cas inches his hand under Dean's head and lifts gently. "Drink the rest of this, okay?"

Sam mixed a dose of acetylcysteine into it, because it was supposed to reduce the risk of Dean vomiting it back up again. Anyway, Dean's dehydrated, and the sugar will do him good.

Dean takes a sip of the soda and grimaces.

"Don't be such a baby, come on," Sam prompts him. He tries for a smile but doesn't think he gets there. And he keeps the glass to Dean's lips until his brother takes another drink.

Dean clumsily drops his arm from his face. His eyes are bloodshot; his pupils dilated from a number of things: the withdrawal, medication, or panic.

"Let me sit up," he says abruptly, voice remarkably clear, and he immediately tries to struggle into a sitting position. Cas slips a hand behind Dean's back, braces his other arm across Dean's chest, and lifts him. Dean seems to have trouble keeping his head up, and he fights to stop his chin from lolling toward his chest.

Sam jumps out of his chair, stalking down the line of beds to snatch more pillows. He returns, stuffing the pillows behind Dean's back, and Cas eases Dean against them. Even that small movement has left Dean breathless.

"You should east something," Sam says. "Eileen's making soup."

Dean frowns. "I'm not…hungry, Sam," he says between gulps for breath.

"You like soup, Dean," Sam protests.

"You need to keep your strength up," Cas says gently.

Dean ignores them. He shuts his eyes and lets his head fall against the pillows. Sam can see each of his freckles standing out starkly against Dean's pale cheeks. He shifts, as if he's uncomfortable or in pain. His eyebrows furrow and a small sound looses from his lips, not quite a whimper. "It's just…can't and…so fucking loud. It's all so loud. And I can hear them."

"Okay," Cas soothes. He hasn't moved his hand from Dean's chest. "Okay, Dean."

Sam grinds his teeth together. He's still on his feet, and suddenly the idea of sitting back at Dean's bedside sounds unbearable. He takes a deep breath, tells himself that Dean will be perfectly safe with Cas looking over him, so he mutters something about going to the kitchen, and then turns on his heel.

Eileen is standing at the stove, stirring something in a pot. It smells good. Despite her culinary inexperience, she'd promised that no one could mess up canned soup, even her. Jack is sitting at the table, looking glum.

He glances up when Sam comes in and looks hopeful. "Can I go see him?" he asks.

Sam hesitates. It's not that the kid couldn't be helpful, it's just that Sam knows Dean would hate to be in such a vulnerable position in front of him. Especially with the whole – Mom thing. Yeah. "He just… needs some space. Sorry, Jack."

Jack's shoulders slump. He picks at a strip of loose wood on the table. "Yeah, okay."

Eileen turns around and fixes Sam with her large, kind eyes. “How’s he doing?” she asks.

Sam just shrugs. Truth is: not bad. Not yet. Sam knows they’re far from the worst of it. Eileen takes a step toward Sam, puts her hand on his arm. Her skin is warm. It isn’t soft; Sam’s never met a hunter without callouses on their palms, but her touch is gentle.

“You should rest,” she says. “You didn’t sleep last night.”

He tried everything in the book of *How to Cure Insomnia* last night, to no avail. Tea, and a warm shower, and relaxation techniques, and Eileen even rubbed his back until her eyes grew so heavy she couldn’t help but curl up next to him and fall asleep. Ordinarily, Sam loves sharing a bed with Eileen, except on nights like last night where he kept her up with his abhorrent sleeping habits. It’s not her fault she got stuck with someone who can barely sleep three hours in a row.

“I’m okay,” Sam says.

“No,” she says firmly, because she knows how to read him like an open book, now. “You’re not. You won’t be able to help Dean if you’re asleep on your feet.” Sam opens his mouth to object, but Eileen puts her hands against his chest, shoves him slightly back toward the open door. “Go,” she insists.

“I should let Cas know –”

“*I’ll* let Cas know,” Eileen says. “I’ll bring them both in some soup. And then I’ll bring you a bowl.”

Sam hesitates for a moment longer, but he catches sight of the fierceness on Eileen’s face, the same expression she uses when she’s aiming a gun at someone, and Sam deflates. “Yeah, okay,” he says. “Thanks.”

Eileen smiles swiftly. She stands on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Don’t get used to it,” she says. “I didn’t sign up to be your maid.”

Sam musters his own smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” he tells her, before heading back out of the kitchen and toward his old room.

OOO

Cas keeps his hand on Dean’s chest, stroking slow and steady patterns against his sternum with his thumb. He can feel Dean’s heartbeat, too

fast, below his sweatshirt. Cas's back hurts from sitting still for so long in the hard-backed chair. His stomach feels empty, despite the warm bowl of soup he'd eaten. The other bowl Eileen brought in sits barely touched on the side table. Dean had managed a few spoonful's before he pushed Cas's hand away and fell against the pillows supporting his back.

Dean's lips are partially opened and his eyes are screwed shut. He's breathing little sips of air and keeps making abortive, strangled noises, half-way to sobs.

And Cas can't stand it. If he only still had access to his Grace, he'd be able to help Dean, maybe not entirely heal him, but at least send him to sleep, take away his pain, ease his fear and confusion even slightly.

"Are you still in pain?" Cas asks, unable to stop himself.

Dean flinches at the sound of his voice, and Cas berates himself. He hadn't meant to make it worse.

"E-everything's so close. It's all…and they're screaming. I can hear them screaming," Dean says, unintelligibly, and Cas wonders what it is Dean's seeing. Dean runs his tongue over his chapped lips. "When's he coming back?" he asks, his voice is hoarse. He peers at Cas under his eyelashes.

"Sam's resting, Dean," Cas says steadily. "He'll be back soon."

"Sam?" Dean sits up unexpectedly, riding a surge of energy. Cas tries to press him gently back to the pillows, but Dean's hand comes up, closes tightly around Cas's wrist. "Sam? N-no. Don't let – mmmh." Dean's voice cuts off with a low moan. He squirms for a minute, turns back on his shoulder, pulls his knees toward his stomach, and doesn't let go of Cas's arm.

"He always comes back," Dean says in a hollow voice. "Don't – don't let him hurt me, please." And Cas knows Dean isn't talking about Sam.

"I won't, Dean," Cas says quietly. He tries to extract his arm from Dean's grip, because the angle hurts Cas's elbow, but Dean hums in protest when Cas tugs his arm away, so Cas does the only thing that makes sense: he moves from the chair to perch on the side of Dean's mattress. Dean immediately curls into the presence of Cas's body. Cas wraps one arm around Dean's shoulder, offers the other to Dean's hand, again, and Dean renews his grip.

It isn't like Dean to be so clingy. Cas knows, if Dean were in his right mind, he wouldn't have been caught dead acting like this. It makes Cas sad, to know that the only times Dean lets himself accept comfort are times when he's given no other choice.

And Cas can't help but think about lying in bed with Dean the other morning. So close he could feel the warmth come off his body. And Cas feels guilty. But he also feels…disappointed.

Because he wants to be there for Dean, but he doesn't want to just be there when Dean isn't thinking, to be some sort of throwaway opportunity. A convenience. That's why Cas left, in the first place, months again now. He doesn't want to just be used by Dean when Dean has to fulfill a need.

Cas wants –

Cas doesn't know what he wants.

"Don't let them," Dean murmurs. He turns his face into Cas's hip. Cas can feel Dean's tears leak through his pants. "Don't let them chain me up again. Not again."

"Dean, it isn't real," Cas says softly. He bends his elbow around Dean's shoulders so he can reach Dean's head. He cards his fingers gently through Dean's hair. "You're safe. I promise you're safe."

"I'll do anything," Dean chokes. "P-please. I'll hurt them instead. I'll do it. I'll hurt them. Just – just not again. No more."

Cas feels nausea build in his stomach when he realizes which moment Dean's reliving. And Cas knows it would kill Dean to know Cas is seeing this, that he's witnessing this moment locked inside Dean's unconscious.

"You're not in Hell," Cas tries again. "I rescued you. It's alright. You're alright."

Dean keeps shuddering. "S-stop," he moans.

Cas prods Dean gently to the side so he has room enough to pull himself fully on the bed. Dean finally lets go of Cas's wrist, but only because he throws his arm across Cas's legs, keeping his face buried in Cas's hip. Cas is fully aware that he is being hugged, and Cas doesn't know what to do about it. Because Dean doesn't *hug*. And he certainly doesn't hug *Cas*.

“Cas?” Dean says, voice suddenly clearer.

“Shhh, Dean,” Cas says. He rubs Dean’s back, deciding for now it would be best to let Dean have what he seems to want, even though he’s obviously unaware of what he’s doing. “I am here. I am here.”

“M sorry, Cas,” Dean whispers. He nuzzles into Cas’s leg. And Cas doesn’t know what Dean thinks he’s apologizing for, something in the past or this present moment, which Dean will inevitably see as some sort of weakness. “M sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Cas says.

“Cas?” Dean says. He lifts his face slightly, as if to check that Cas really is there. “C-Cas?”

“It’s me, Dean. I promise,” Cas replies. Dean nods, shuts his eyes, lets his head fall again.

“Can I – um,” a voice in the doorway makes Cas raise his head. It’s Jack, standing with his hands clasped in front of his chest, biting his lip in a way Cas knows he got from Dean, looking lost and unbearably childlike. If he finds Cas and Dean’s position on the bed strange, he doesn’t say anything. “Can I do anything?”

Cas knows Sam wanted to keep Jack away, in an effort to preserve Dean’s dignity, but Cas very much doubts Dean’s going to remember much of this. And Cas understands the helplessness of wanting to be of use but having nothing to do.

“You can bring the dishes into the kitchen,” Cas tries to smile, and Jack’s face brightens marginally at the idea of a task, however menial. “It’s cold by now.”

“Okay, yeah,” says Jack. He comes over to collect the bowls from the nightstand. He pauses to look at Dean.

Dean’s quieter now, still breathing raggedly into Cas’s thigh, but he’s stop muttering. Cas keeps up rubbing his back. If they’re lucky, maybe Dean will fall asleep.

“Is he okay?” Jack asks in a hushed voice. “Sam won’t,” he swallows. “He won’t tell me anything.”

“He’ll be okay,” Cas says firmly. It might be a long road yet, but Cas has to believe it: Dean will be okay.

“It –” Jack’s face screws up like he’s in pain. “I hate not being able to just heal him.”

“I know, Jack,” Cas can’t help but sigh. He can’t look at Jack, because the pain in the boy’s face is like looking in a mirror. He smooths Dean’s damp bangs away from his forehead. “I know.”

OOO

Dean is pleading, on his knees at Sam’s feet, and Sam is holding a blade to his windpipe.

“Sammy, it isn’t you. Sammy – Sammy, please,” Dean stammers before Sam slips the knife through Dean’s throat. Blood seeps over Sam’s fingers. He knows the heat, the slickness, the metal tang of it well.

And then Sam wakes up, choking on air and trembling. His old bedroom in the bunker is pitch black. He didn’t realize how much he’d grown to miss windows until he moved back into a place that had them.

Sam knows the difference between nightmares and visions; he’s certainly had enough of both. And he knows that it was only a nightmare. But that doesn’t stop the cold wave of panic across his body, the sickness in his stomach, and the need to rush immediately to Dean’s side, gather his brother in his arms and make for absolute sure that he’s alive and okay.

He waits for the echoes of the nightmare to fade, trying to catch his breath, before he realizes that he can still hear Dean screaming.

“Shit.” Sam’s out of his bed and running toward the infirmary before he can make up his mind to get up.

Dean’s writhing on his bed. Cas is bowed over him, gripping both his wrists, and trying to calm him down.

“You’re going to hurt yourself, Dean,” Cas says. His voice is strained, obviously trying to keep both Dean and himself calm.

“He’s in my head!” Dean yells. “He’s – fuck – he’s in my head.” Dean arcs off the bed and tries to wrench himself from Cas’s grip on his wrists.

Sam rushes forward and presses his brother back against the mattress. “Dean,” he says. “I’ve got you. Come on, man.” Dean is obviously

weakened from the abuse his body's taken over the past few days, but his panic makes him unexpectedly strong, and he cracks his forehead against Sam's in what might be an accident or might just be a reflexive response to being pinned down.

Sam loses his grip and recoils as he momentarily sees stars.

"G-get him out!" Dean says. He kicks out and his foot plants itself in Cas's stomach. Cas doubles over with a pained cough. It's enough of a distraction for Dean to pull free. He rolls off the bed and lands on the cement floor in a bundle of blankets. "Get him the fuck out," he says, and then he starts pounding his forehead on the ground.

"Shit – no – Dean!" Sam darts forward. Cas meets him there. The two of them together, now prepared for Dean fighting back, manage to haul him off the floor.

There's a clatter of footsteps from the hallway, and Sam doesn't need to look to know Dean's yells have drawn the attention of Jack and Eileen.

"Sam, what can we do?" Eileen says at once.

"Get the –" Sam's voice catches in his throat, when Dean bucks against their hands and his elbow catches Sam under the ribs.

"Dean, please," says Cas, still in his desperately calm voice. Sam renews his grip on Dean's arm and the two of them manage to wrestle Dean back to his feet, then they all but shove him back onto the cot.

"Get a couple cuffs from the storage room," Sam says, and he hates himself for saying it, but Dean cut himself when he fell, and there's blood dripping into his eyes, and there's no telling what other damage he could do before this is all over.

But it's definitely the wrong thing to say, because some part of Dean must still be conscious of the present moment, because his eyes pop and his struggle redoubles. Eileen dashes forward to help hold him down, and Sam assumes Jack went to get the cuffs.

"No," Dean chokes. "No. Don't let them – you said you wouldn't let them," Dean says, and he looks right at Cas, and Cas looks like he's about to cry.

"I'm sorry, Dean," Cas says. "But you're hurting yourself."

“Don’t –” Dean says, flailing uselessly now that three of them are holding him down. “Fucking don’t. *Please* –”

Sam feels like he’s been stuck in the stomach with a knife. Pressure builds inside his head until all he can hear is screaming. And his eyes burn. He blinks furiously, refusing to fall to pieces.

And, again, he wonders if this is a good idea. That maybe Sam should have just sucked it up and made Dean stay at the hospital, where they could have at least had people around who knew what they were doing. But there’s also no way in hell, Sam knows, that having Dean restrained by a whole lot of strangers would end better than Dean being held down by his own family.

Then Jack returns with the cuffs, and Sam pushes his doubts to the back of his head, where they won’t get in the way of doing the job. He works quickly and efficiently, trying to forget it’s his brother he’s chaining down, who’s fighting back tooth and nail because Dean fucking hates to be tied up and Sam –

He cuffs one of Dean’s wrists after the other, chaining the other end of the cuffs to the metal braces under the cot. Dean keeps fighting, but the ability to form coherent words seems to have left him, because he’s only gasping loudly in a way that’s too close to sobbing. Each noise drives the knife in Sam’s gut a little deeper.

“Dude, I promise it’s just until you calm down,” Sam says. “Just calm down, please.”

Cas moves so he can get a better grip on Dean’s shoulders, perching on the bed near Dean’s head and trying to still his arms, because Dean’s tearing his wrists against the metal cuffs.

“Jack,” Sam says through his tight throat. “Can you – there should be a roll of gauze on that shelf.” He directs Jack with a shaking finger, and the kid races off, returning a moment later with a roll of bandages. Jack’s face is stark white. Sam’s seen Jack scared plenty of times, but now he looked terrified half out of his mind.

“I’m just gonna wrap your wrists, okay?” Sam says, marveling at the fact his voice is still steady. He wants to keep talking, telegraphing his motions so he doesn’t frighten Dean any more than he already is.

His hands shake when he pulls off a length of gauze. Eileen’s hand clasps Sam’s shoulder, and Sam is glad for her steady presence behind him. He kneels at the side of the bed. Eileen uses her other hand to

grip Dean's and hold his arm steadier so Sam can better get to his wrist. He wraps the gauze around Dean's arm in an effort to protect him from any chaffing or bruising. After he's done, he and Eileen round the bed to do Dean's other arm.

Dean is still fighting Cas. Feverishly muttering, "Stop stop stop," under his breath. The restraints clatter against the bedposts. Veins pop in Dean's temple. The cut on his forehead still leaks blood down his face. Blood is on Cas's hands, too, as he attempts to stop Dean from hitting his head against the headboard.

Then Dean goes rigid, and for a heart-stopping moment, Sam's sure he's having a seizure, and what the fuck then? How the hell is Sam supposed to make this better?

But then Dean's eyes blow open and he stares at a point behind Sam. "Sam – hellhound." He says with so much certainty that Sam can't help a chill from running up his spine.

Sam spares a glance over his shoulder to the spot Dean's fixated on, but there's nothing there. Of course, there's nothing fucking there.

"Sammy," Dean says urgently, tugging against Cas's hand on his forehead. "It's right there. Sammy – run –"

"Dean," Cas says slowly. "You're hallucinating. There's nothing there."

"No," Dean moans. "It's getting – closer – Sammy! Sammy, please. Don't let it get me."

"Dean – shit – calm down!" Sam doesn't mean to yell, but his heartbeat throbs in his throat, and he just tied his brother to a bed, and he doesn't know what else to do.

Cas shoots Sam a look that might be reprimanding, or might just be desperation. "Dean," he says firmly. He presses one hand against Dean's forehead and the other against his chest. "We're trying to help you. I promise that whatever you're seeing right now isn't real."

Sam swallows bile, standing helplessly while he waits for his brother to tire himself out. There's a throbbing bump on his forehead from where Dean hit him, and it makes Sam remember that Dean's bleeding.

But Eileen remembers first. She returns to Dean's bedside with a bowl of water and a damp cloth. She swiftly clears the blood from Dean's

face. Cas keeps up a steady litany of comforting noises while she works.

“Shh, it’s alright, Dean,” Cas says, and Sam feels so useless. Because they’re both so much better at this than he is.

Eileen finishes cleaning Dean’s cut, just a shallow gash, and fixes a small pad of gauze across it, fixing it to Dean’s skin with medical tape. Dean shuts his eyes. He looks terrified, and Sam wonders uneasily who Dean’s seeing instead of Eileen.

Finally, Dean stops struggling quite as hard. All his muscles remain taught, but his shoulders sag with exhaustion and the chains stop rattling.

Sam reaches to the floor to pick up the fallen blankets. He throws them back over Dean, and his brother recoils at the unexpected contact, which makes Sam wince.

Dean turns his head to the side, trying to hide his face in the pillows, and Sam wonders if he can feel all their eyes on him. He hits his nose against Cas’s thigh, but he doesn’t move away.

“G-go away,” Dean murmurs. Sam doesn’t know if Dean knows who he’s talking to, now, or if he’s still talking to Michael. “S-stop.”

Sam runs a hand through his hair. Suddenly, he realizes that everyone’s staring at him: Jack, Eileen, and Cas, waiting for him to make some sort of decision.

“We should – um,” Sam says, feeling stupid. “We should try to see if he’ll rest now. He can’t –” Sam checks a clock on the wall to see what time it is, and, shit, his heart sinks into his stomach when he realizes he’d only been sleeping for about two hours. “He can’t have more meds for another half-hour.” And there’s no way Sam’s messing around with drugs after such a recent overdose. “So, we’ll just try to keep him quiet for now.”

“Right,” Eileen nods tersely.

“Okay,” says Jack uncertainly.

“Cas, do you want me to take over?” Sam asks. “You can get some rest. You look beat, man.”

But Cas is already shaking his head before Sam can finish his question.

“I’ll stay,” he says, and sets his jaw in that way that always reminds Sam that Cas, after all, used to lead a garrison in Heaven.

“It’s not real,” Dean moans. He stirs fitfully, gives another weak pull at the restraints. “None of it is fucking real.”

Cas hushes him, runs his fingers through his hair. Something about the warmth of the movement makes Sam’s stomach ache with an emotion he can’t quite place.

“Is it still Michael, do you think?” Sam asks.

Cas shakes his head sadly and shrugs. “It was Hell earlier,” he says woodenly. “Alastair.”

“Fuck,” says Sam. Dean hasn’t had a Hell flashback for years. At least not that Sam knows about. If detoxing brought back Hell, then there’s no telling what other kind of shit it dredged up.

Then Sam looks at the clock again. It’s still early evening. And it’s only the first day. Sam sighs heavily and hooks a chair with his ankle. He sits down and puts his head in his hands. They’re in for a long night.

OOO

Three months before

It isn’t them, ultimately, who find God, but God who finds them. He sends a text with Sam’s phone, telling them to meet at a casino outside of Lincoln. And fuck if Dean knows what Chuck’s doing in a casino, biding his time playing the slot machines.

Dean point-blank refuses to let Amara or Michael magic him to the location, so he and Cas drive a silent and tense two and a half hours in the Impala, Eileen fidgeting in the backseat.

Amara and Michael are waiting for them, and so is Chuck. Dean feels an almost uncontrollable rush of anger at seeing Chuck, a feeling that combats the wave of relief at seeing Sammy, despite the fact that Chuck has his little brother zip-tied to a chair in the center of the casino. But Sammy, at least, looks unhurt, and he gives Dean one of his patented *don’t do anything stupid* looks.

Which Dean immediately ignores: “Get your fucking hands off my brother!” Cas’s hand catches Dean’s wrist as Dean lunges forward.

Chuck waves his hand and suddenly Dean can't speak.

"Let's try to keep things civilized, hmm?" Chuck says, with an infuriating look of self-importance.

"Brother," Amara warns. "Please. We're just here to talk to you."

"Really?" Chuck cocks an eyebrow, and for the first time Dean sees a resemblance between he and Amara: their attitudes of unbearable cockiness are identical. A family of assholes. "Then why the convenient binding spell my favorite son is currently hiding under his robes? Metaphorical robes, that is."

"I have never been your favorite anything," Michael spits. "Except perhaps your favorite tool."

Chuck ignores him. "I suggest a trade. Let's call it a hostage exchange. You toss over your spell, and I'll not harm a single pretty hair on little Sammy's head."

"Don't listen to him," Sam immediately says.

Amara interrupts. She has eyes only for her brother. "We both know you're bluffing. You can't hurt Sam unless you hurt yourself."

"Want to bet?" Chuck says. Chuck doesn't even move. One second Sam's fine, and the next his face is drained of blood and he's doubled over in pain, wrists straining against his bounds.

If Dean could scream, he'd have done so. Instead he yanks his arm out of Cas's grip and dives for his brother. Before he can reach Sam, a solid wall of energy slams into him and Dean is flung backward.

Dean crashes into the casino wall behind him. He hears something shatter. The back of his head cracks against the wall, and his vision momentarily snaps to black. The air is crushed from his lungs. He falls to the ground and lands wrong on his arm. He hears the joint pop out of its socket before he registers the fire-hot pain across his shoulder.

"Enough!" Amara cries, and there's a crackle of something like electricity. The air smells suddenly like ozone.

Through a haze of pain, Dean realizes Sammy's stopped screaming.

"Dean," Cas reaches for Dean, pulls him up, and Dean groans.

Apparently, the block Chuck put on Dean's voice is broken, because

Dean's perfectly able to choke out, "If you even think about healing me again, Cas, I swear –"

Across the floor, Chuck shakes himself. He's paler than he was before, evidently hurting, but he's still on his feet. "You see," he says, breathless. "I can take a great deal more than dear Sammy, here."

It's true. Sammy's folded over his knees. He's clenching his teeth and shaking, and Dean wants to kill something.

"Brother," Amara says, and she sounds sad. "Let him go."

"What do you care?" Chuck demands. "You wanted to destroy this world three year ago!"

"And you convinced me not to!" Amara shrieks back. And Dean is suddenly irrefutably and horribly aware of how truly powerful Chuck and Amara are, and how infinitesimal a part Dean can play in this fight.

Cas helps Dean to his feet. Dean holds his arm tight against his chest, and they join Michael and Eileen behind Amara. Dean only cares about Sammy, and he meets his brother's eyes across the distance, trying to tell him without words to stay the hell out of the way of whatever comes next.

"You disappoint me, Amara," Chuck says with a frown, and his body sizzled with barely contained energy.

"No. You disappoint me," Amara says. She steps forward. "Michael, now!" She cries and Michael summons the spell from – from somewhere – a place between dimensions or some metaphysical shit like that. Michael sets the ball of mixed ingredients aflame with a wave of his hand.

Amara takes over. She shoves the ball of fire through the air and Chuck raises his hands to block it, but it passes right through and slams into his chest. Chuck's lifted off his feet. He writhes in midair. His entire body glows like his veins have caught fire. The light within him grows until its blinding white and Dean has to shut his eyes.

Then Chuck implodes. And it's like the world forgets how to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

It really bugs me that the show constantly lambastes Sam for his

choice to leave Dean in Purgatory in favor of trying to find a new life with Amelia. Because, in a normal world, that's what you do when someone you love dies: you move on. You move forward. You try to heal. I'm not saying that Sam necessarily made those decisions from a super well-adjusted standpoint (he was 100% depressed out of his skull and just kept driving because he couldn't stop, and he and Amelia did not have a healthy relationship because relationships founded on shared trauma almost always turn codependent and unbalanced), but he also definitely thought Dean and Cas were both gone for good, so all he could do was freaking *try* to move on. He did not *check out* or *abandon* anything. He did everything he could to stay afloat that year, to recover from the enormous traumas he'd experienced (not the least of which was the 100-and-something death of his brother, and we've already seen how poorly Sam copes with losing Dean), and, you know what? sometimes self-care looks selfish from the perspective of the outside world, but that doesn't mean that it is. Rant over.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months before

The first thing Dean notices, once his ears stop ringing and he's blinked away most of the bright stain on his pupils, is Sam: his brother's been flung away from the blast radius. He's slumped on the ground, hair charred, not moving, and the chair he was on is now a splintered mess of wood and twisted metal.

Dean's stomach lurches. He's stumbling to his feet and across the warehouse floor before he recognizes anything else. All there is is panic. Because fuck. Fuck no. Not now. Not now after fucking everything and Dean can't – Dean can't. Not again.

"Sammy!" Dean collapses to his knees at his brother's side. "Sammy. Fuck. Come on, man. Wake up." He nudges Sam's shoulder, rolls him onto his back. His fingers find the underside of Sam's jaw and he realizes he's shaking.

He registers a pulse at the exact same time Sam's eyes flicker open, and his chest expands in a desperate gasp for air. Sam rockets upward, coughing, eyes blown wide. Dean immediately catches him around the shoulders and tugs him to his chest, shoulder screaming in protest. He's dimly aware that he's probably strangling his brother, that he's certainly not making it easier for Sam to catch his breath, but Dean can't let go.

"Shit," Dean says. "Fucking shit, man. Fuck you. Don't you ever fucking do that to me again."

"Dean –" Sam pants. "Man, you're going to break my ribs!"

"You're a fucking bitch," Dean snarls into Sam's hair, smelling smoke, and he's either laughing or crying; he can't tell the difference anymore.

Sam finally eases his breathing and relaxes into Dean's embrace. "Jerk," he says fiercely, and wraps his arms tightly around Dean's waist.

OOO

Present day

Sam manages to convince Dean to take another valium. After that, Dean finally quiets down. It's probably due mostly to the fact that his body's exhausted, and he actually falls into an uneasy doze for a couple hours, punctuated by an occasional groan or incoherent murmur. Sam wants to take the restraints off, but he also knows it's not a good idea to do so before they see what Dean's like after he wakes up again.

Cas stays perched on the side of Dean's bed, even though it must not be a very comfortable seat. He runs his hands through Dean's hair when he stirs, and occasionally hushes him with gentle words. Sam feels a little bit like he's intruding. Which is…uncomfortable and strange, and makes Sam feel guilty, because Cas has always been there for the both of them, and Sam should be glad for the extra set of hands. Sam has no business feeling jealous. Besides….

I love your brother.

"You should, um," Sam starts, not entirely sure what he's going to say, but Cas looks at him expectantly, and Sam immediately regrets opening his mouth. "You guys should, ah, talk. You know, after this is over."

"Talk about what?" Cas says. His brow pinches, just like it used to when everything about humans was puzzling and strange: toothpaste, traffic lights, water bottles, and toasters.

Sam rubs the back of his neck. He looks down. "About, ah, what you told me before. You should let Dean know. He can…be a little obtuse sometimes."

Castiel laughs weakly. "Yes. That I am aware of."

Between them, Dean feebly pulls against one of his cuffs, moans and mutters, "Get out. Please get out."

Which makes Sam want to throw something. Or maybe throw up.

Sam doesn't know what to do. His whole world feels like it's been turned on its head. He's seen Dean crumble plenty of times, had to learn to carry his brother when Dean couldn't do it himself: after Dad died, during that horrible year and a half with the Mark of Cain, after

Cas died and Mom went through the portal, after Michael – so Sam should really understand by now that his big brother isn't indestructible.

The thing is, Sam never thought it would be something like this. Sure, Sam's been fooling himself about Dean's mental state for a long time now. But he'd always sort of assumed Dean would be able to shake himself loose, that after things calmed down a little, Dean would adjust.

But Dean tried to fucking *kill himself* a day ago. That's not exactly adjusting. And Sam needs to do something about it, even though he knew it would hurt, and he knew Dean would hate it.

"We should probably keep an eye on him for a little while," Sam says heavily. "I could move back in –"

"No," Cas cuts him off. "That isn't fair for you and Eileen."

"She'd understand," Sam says. And she *would.* That isn't what feels so heavy on Sam's chest. The horrible, crushing feeling in his lungs. The small, selfish part of himself that just wants this to be over. That wants to be free, really free, to give him and Eileen a shot. It took so long for the two of them to get to a place where they were comfortable with – with each other – even if they still stayed away from labels – even though they lived together now but Sam didn't think he'd actually ever called her his girlfriend.

And Eileen deserves more than that. Sam wants to be able to give her more than that.

"He's my *brother*," Sam objects. "It isn't fair of me to dump him on you."

Cas shakes his head. "I want to help."

Sam doesn't know what to say. He's tired. It's been a long few days.

"Do you think," Cas begins tentatively. Sam looks up. Cas takes a deep breath, "that perhaps the bunker isn't the best place for him?"

"I don't know, man," Sam says. "This is the first place Dean's really ever had a home since he was a little kid. I don't know how he feels about it."

"I just thought," Cas continues. "What with all the horrible things that

have happened here. With the idea that you're no longer living here –" Cas raises a hand when Sam opens his mouth to say something, to give voice to his guilt about leaving. "That maybe a change in scenery would be nice."

"Yeah, maybe," Sam says. He stares at his brother. Dean's chest rises and falls at a more natural pace. A little bit of the pain, confusion, and fear have smoothed themselves out of his forehead. Maybe he'll sleep easy for a few more hours yet.

At the head of the mattress, Cas unsuccessful tries to smother a yawn.

"You should get some sleep," Sam says.

"I don't sleep," Cas says with a slight frown.

Sam nearly smiles. He shakes his head. "You're a worse liar than Dean is."

Cas rolls his eyes, which is such a human gesture, and one he so obviously got from Dean, that Sam can't help but smile. Cas eases himself off Dean's bed.

"Wake me if you need anything," Cas says sternly. Then, instead of walking out of the door and toward his own bedroom, Cas turns around and falls onto the nearest hospital cot. He curls into a ball and is snoring within five minutes.

Eileen comes by to sit with Sam for a little while, bringing tea, before she kisses him and heads off to Sam's old bedroom for the night. Sam aches to follow her, but he can't leave Dean again, so Sam fights to keep his eyes open as the bunker falls silent. He gets up to walk a couple paces down the center of the infirmary to keep himself awake, but he immediately returns to Dean's bedside when Dean starts stirring again.

"Hey, man, it's okay," Sam says at once, hoping to head-off another violent outburst.

Dean blinks his eyes open. He doesn't seem quite able to focus on Sam's face, and Sam can see the confusion pull at his brother's eyebrows when he scans the room. He tugs against the cuffs on his wrists, and Sam sees Dean's eyes flash with fear.

"It's okay," Sam says again. He puts a hand on Dean's chest. Sam can feel heat radiating off his brother, so he puts the back of his hand

against Dean's forehead. He's definitely running a low fever.

"Who – who are you?" Dean says, his voice is breathy with panic.

"Dean," Sam says around the gut punch. "It's Sam. It's your brother."

"Sammy?" Dean whispers.

"Yeah," says Sam. He swallows. He brushes Dean's hair away from his sweaty forehead, being careful not to disturb the bandage. "It's Sammy."

"Sam?" Dean's voice catches. His eyes well with tears. "It's not real," he says, and his bottom lip starts wobbling. "It's not fucking real. None of it's real." Dean sounds confused and scared. He sounds like a kid. Like nothing Sam's ever heard his big brother sound like.

"I'm real, Dean," Sam says quietly.

Dean presses his lips together and shakes his head. His face crumbles, and then he's crying. Tears stream down his cheeks. "N-no," he says after a strangled breath. "None of it…none of it…fucking real."

"Okay," Sam says, somehow more panicked now than he'd been before. He's seen his brother cry on so few occasions, and never when Dean couldn't somehow hide it. "Okay, Dean."

Sam makes up his mind quickly. He snatches the key for the handcuffs off the night table and bends to release Dean's left wrist from the cuffs. Dean immediately pulls his freed arm over his face, hiding his tears. He continues to gasp wetly into the crook of his arm.

Then Sam rounds the foot of Dean's bed to access his other wrist. Once freed, Dean snatches his right arm over his chest, and rolls onto his side. He tucks his knees up to his abdomen and curls in on himself, the way Sam's seen him do in a bad fight, when he's trying to make himself as small as possible. Dean swallows something that's nearly a whimper. The frightened, vulnerable sound makes Sam's breath catch in his throat.

Dean's shuddering all over, so Sam adjusts the covers over his body, tucking them firmly but not too-tight around Dean's shoulders and back, knowing his brother isn't going to want to feel confined again.

Sam can tell by Dean's shaking shoulders and hitching breath that his brother is still crying. Sam doesn't know what to say to him. He's

unsure how much physical contact his brother can handle right now, so Sam tentatively reaches out a hand, lets just the tips of his fingers brush Dean's back.

Dean flinches hard at the touch, and Sam immediately pulls back. "Sorry," he mutters.

"I – I killed them," Dean chokes. "I killed them and their – their blood is – everywhere." Sam doesn't know which memory Dean's reliving. There are so many that could apply.

"You undid his restraints?" Cas's voice says. Sam looks over to the second hospital cot, where Cas is sitting up, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"He's okay, Cas," Sam says and needs him to believe it. And he hopes the worst of it really is over, because he honestly doesn't think either he or Dean will be able to get through the trauma of having to cuff him to the bed again.

Dean pulls his face away from his arm to look for the new voice. His bloodshot, wet eyes fall on Cas and he hiccups in surprise. "You're dead," he whispers. "I thought you were dead."

Cas's eyebrows crease. He leans forward and braces his elbows on his knees. "I'm not dead, Dean."

"No," Dean moans and covers his face again. "S-stop. Make it stop."

It's been four hours since Dean's last pill, so Sam pours Dean a glass of water and taps out another valium into his palm.

"You think you can drink something, Dean?" Sam says. Dean doesn't answer, so Sam kneels at his side. He gently nudges Dean's arms away from his face. "Here, man," he says, and hands over the pill.

Dean takes it on reflex. His hands are shaking too hard to hold the cup, so Sam presses it to his lips for him. Dean manages to take a couple sips before he chokes again and ducks his face into the pillow.

"Okay," Sam says. He takes a shaky breath. "Just try to sleep, alright?"

OOO

The first thing Dean notices when he wakes up is the headache. It's

impossible not to. It's like a red-hot pick is being pounded into his temple with a mallet. Every thud drives it in deeper, cleaving his head in two, and radiating pain all the way down his jaw.

It hurts so badly he can't imagine opening his eyes, and he can't help his breath from stuttering in his throat. A whine of pain escapes his lips, even though he tries to fight it, and then there's a voice:

"Take it easy, dude."

For the first time in what feels like days, Dean truly recognizes Sammy's voice. And Sammy's the only one who's there. The past… however many hours or days or weeks, are all just a nightmare blur of faces, voices, and memories. But it all feels a little clearer now. Partly because of the unrelenting headache. The resounding ache in every part of his body, like he's been run over by an eighteen-wheeler.

T-boned in the Impala. Already bleeding body slammed from one side of the backseat to the other. His head cracks against the window and everything goes dark.

Or maybe he's been systematically torn limb from limb. Splayed open on the cot. Someone's fingers playing with his intestines. And Alastair's voice in his ear you will always belong to me.

No. Fuck fuck fuck. No.

"Dean?" Sammy tries again. There's a light pressure on Dean's shoulder and Dean tries to lean into it. He doesn't want to be unmoored again, to drift helter-skelter through his mind, landing wherever the fuck his subconscious thinks is a good idea.

"Hey," Sammy says, and he sounds relieved as well as reassuring. He presses a little harder on Dean's shoulder. "You're alright, man."

Dean tries to make sound come out of his throat, but his esophagus feels scraped raw. Probably from the screaming. Dean remembers screaming. And his mouth tastes like blood. All he can manage is a week hum.

"Can you drink something?" Sam says gently.

Dean still can't talk, so he cracks an eyelid, instead. Sam's face bobs in front of him; weirdly distorted like a funhouse mirror. The sight makes nausea reawaken in Dean's gut. He swallows bile, shuts his eyes tight, and drops his chin in something he hopes Sam will interpret as a

nod.

“Okay,” Sam says on an exhale. Sam’s hand inches to the back of Dean’s head. He lifts, and the motion makes Dean’s head spin. His stomach drops. Dean gasps reflexively as pain sears from one ear to the other.

“Sorry,” Sam says quickly. The cool rim of a glass touches Dean’s bottom lip, and Dean opens his mouth. The water is cool. It tastes gross because his mouth tastes gross, but it feels good going down his throat. But then it lands heavy in his stomach, and he has to stop.

He twists his head away, moans again, and Sam gets the point. Dean hears a clink as Sam sets the glass on the night table.

Dean recognizes that they have to be in the bunker’s infirmary. Beyond that, he doesn’t know how much time or space has passed since Sam and Cas picked him up from the hospital.

He remembers what landed him in the hospital in the first place, though.

The memory makes Dean want to crawl somewhere where Sam can’t see him. He can emerge again when he feels marginally more human. Or just stay tucked away forever. Maybe he can sneak out of the bunker, head out on his own for a little while. Just keep fucking driving.

A pulse of sick pain through his skull cuts off his thoughts, and Dean chokes out, “Head hurts,” even though he knows he sounds like a child. He clumsily lifts an arm and covers his eyes. His hand brushes a bandage on his forehead, and he can’t remember how he hurt himself.

“Sorry,” Sam says again. “I can’t give you anything. Not if you want to keep your liver.” And maybe Sam sounds a little like he’s reproaching Dean, which makes Dean feel even more like he’s a kid.

Dean concentrates on breathing to quiet his nausea, trying to ignore the horrible pressure in his head. Trying not to cry.

“You, um, you better now?” Sam asks. And he’s really asking whether Dean’s still hallucinating hellhounds and bloodbaths, whether Sam and Cas still look like horrible imitations of themselves, carrying knives to carve up Dean’s insides.

Feeling Michael’s fingers wrap themselves around Dean’s mind, again.

Shove his head under water. Don't let him come up for air.

"M fine," Dean murmurs. Sam huffs in exasperation. Dean really fucking doesn't want to deal with Sam's sanctimonious bullshit right now. "Where's –" it takes his tongue a while to works its way around the hard c sound. "Cas?"

"He's making coffee," Sam says. "He'll be back soon. Eileen went out with Jack."

"How long I been out?" Dean rasps.

Sam sighs. "About twenty-four hours. Honestly, you're probably lucky."

"Yeah?" Dean says wryly. "Fuck that." And he's been talking too much, so he has to take a break to do more heavy breathing.

And, weirdly, even though Dean's pretty sure he hasn't done anything to warrant it, his answer makes Sam angry. "You could have died," Sam says loudly. Dean's head pulses agonizingly in response. "Why the hell didn't you tell us it was so bad?"

"F-fuck you, too," Dean chokes out, even though he knows it's only going to make things worse. But he doesn't want to deal with this right now. He wants Sammy to leave him the fuck alone. He wants to go back to sleep and not wake up again. He feels like he did after he woke up in the hospital, when everything was too close and too far and nothing felt real. Too much was touching him. Too many noises.

Sam takes a deep breath. "You can't keep trying to do everything on your own, Dean. You need help."

And what kind of help does Sammy think Dean needs? Dean's not fucking crazy. Dean's fucking fine. Dean just needs to be left alone. Because no one fucking needs him, and Dean's just turned into a fucking problem child. A huge inconvenience. And everyone would be a helluva lot better off if they just left Dean alone.

"Don't…talk to me like I'm a…fucking kid," Dean says, and it would be a whole lot more convincing if he wasn't gasping for breath after every other word.

"Then stop fucking acting like it," Sam snaps. "We should have left your ass in that damn hospital, you know that? They could have put you on psychiatric hold and we should have let them."

Dean feels cold. He's aware that he's shaking, but it's a distant sort of realization. Like he's floating a couple inches above his body, just observing the jolts of energy traveling through his veins.

It's hard to make his lips move. Hard to drag the words up his throat. But it's important that Sam understand. Something very faraway pounds inside his brain, reminding him that it's very important for Sammy to know.

"I didn't try to kill myself, Sammy."

Sam snorts. He doesn't say anything. Dean stops trying to tether himself to his body and just lets himself drift. He wants to be away. Everything feels heavy and foggy around him. If he opened his eyes, he's sure the room would be coated in white mist.

"You need more meds," Sam says. Then he makes Dean drink another glass of ginger ale with acetylcysteine. Dean keeps it down for about a minute before he pukes over the side of the cot. At which point, Sam chokes back something that might be a sob or a curse, turns on his heel, and stalks out.

And then Dean is alone. Alone alone alone. And the word echoes inside a cavernous space within his head, the gap that refuses to connect his mind back to his body. And a tiny voice replies *you've always been alone.* And Dean doesn't know who the voice is: Michael or Alastair or Dad or the Mark or maybe all of them.

Dean keeps his eyes shut against the hot well of tears that builds inside his head. Because something's gone wrong in the grand scheme of things. They're never really free. It's never really over. Somewhere, God is still pulling all the strings, just playacting a new family drama with his favorite puppets. And none of it is real. Not real not real not real. Dean isn't real. Dean doesn't want to be real –

"Dean?" says a gentle voice. It's Cas. Which doesn't help anything. It just makes Dean want to cry more. But he swallows down the sob that builds in his throat. It gets lodged half-way down his esophagus, makes it impossible to reply, but Dean doesn't care. He's done with talking for a little while. Talking just makes everything worse.

Made Sammy leave. Made Sammy hate him. Dean wants to die.

"What happened?" Cas says. He approaches Dean's bed. Dean can feel his presence looming above him, but he doesn't chance looking, because he doesn't want to see Cas again with a bloody knife in his

hand or rotting flesh peeling away from his skull. “Sam said you were awake. But he looked upset.”

Cas spots the vomit on the ground. He sighs. Retreats to find something to mop it up with.

Dean listens to him move around the infirmary. Everything sounds too loud. Too close. Dean can hear every whisper of clothing, ever squeak of a rubber-soled shoe on the floor, and it makes the ache in Dean’s head redouble.

“Can I do anything to help?” Cas asks when he’s done cleaning.

Dean manages to shake his head, no, because there’s nothing that can help, because Sammy doesn’t trust him and Sammy won’t give him pain meds and Dean remembers how sometimes Dad wouldn’t give him pain meds, because they were running low, and Dean could *just take it like a man, couldn’t he, son?* Just clench his jaw and breathe through his nose while Dad stitched up a gash in his back or popped his shoulder back into his socket.

“Sam doesn’t want to leave you alone, right now,” Cas says, like it’s an apology. And Dean hears the creak of the wooden chair by the bed as Cas settles in. “He isn’t really angry, Dean,” Cas continues. “He’s just worried about you.” Which is basically the same thing Eileen told Dean when Dean woke up, hungover, at their apartment.

Everyone’s fucking worried. So worried when Dean’s fucking *fine*. And if Dean could just go away, could just leave, then they wouldn’t have to worry anymore.

But Dean doesn’t say anything. Suddenly it doesn’t seem like he can. He remembers being a little kid – huge swathes of that time are completely gone from Dean’s memory, like they never even happened, whereas other parts or startling clear, like they happened yesterday – Dean can remember Dad begging him to talk after the fire, coaxing him with cookies and candy and trying not to let his frustration show when Dean refused to open his mouth.

But it wasn’t like it was a decision. Dad never understood that Dean wasn’t choosing not to talk, it was simply that he couldn’t. That there weren’t words any more that made sense, that he couldn’t drag them up his throat, couldn’t form them with his tongue. They were too heavy.

Dean remembers once Dad got so sick of him, he dropped him off at a

daycare center. Dean spent the day curled up in the “play house” corner of the room, holding a baby doll to his chest, and when Dad picked him up at night, the teacher asked Dad if there was something wrong with Dean, suggested Dad get him screened by an autism specialist. Dad never brought Dean to that daycare again.

So, Dean remembers stuff like that. But he can’t remember the first time Dad brought them to see Missouri, or met Caleb and Pastor Jim, or when Sammy learned to walk, or simple things like eating peanut butter sandwiches or playing with matchbox cars.

But he remembers random nights when Dad would pass out from drinking too much whiskey and wouldn’t hear Sammy crying, so Dean had to get up and figure out how to climb inside Sammy’s crib and climb out again without dropping his baby brother. Figure out how to change his diaper or warm up a bottle. And he remembers coming into the bathroom once, finding Dad on the floor with a knife against his wrist.

Your mother’s death, it almost killed me.

And Dean doesn’t understand why he’s remembering stuff like that now. When he hasn’t thought about it in years. Hasn’t thought about it because it’s not like any of it really matters.

“Would you like to eat something?” Cas asks. Dean had sort of hoped Cas thought he’d fallen asleep. But Cas has always had an uncanny ability to sense those sort of things – probably from all the hours he spent watching Dean and Sam sleep in hotel rooms, the creep.

Dean can’t imagine trying to eat anything. He shakes his head.

Cas twitches, almost like he was going to reach out a hand to touch Dean, but he hesitates. “Do you mind if I –” he clears his throat. “Is it alright if I check to see if you still have a temperature?”

Dean can’t waste more energy on shrugging, or nodding, or shaking his head, so he just twists his head a little into the pillow, wonders if he wished hard enough if he could just disappear. Cas takes it for permission, and a minute later his warm, dry palm cups Dean’s forehead.

“You’re still warm,” Cas says.

Fucking eureka.

And Dean doesn't know where the wave of bitterness comes from, but it's at least better than the emptiness. The despair so thick he can barely breathe through it.

"Awesome," he croaks. He's not entirely sure he's loud enough for Cas to hear him. The word hurts coming up his throat. It tastes like smoke. Dean hates the smell of smoke. He supposes that's a stupid side effect of running out into the smoke-filled hallway, hearing Dad screaming, smelling Mom burning. Holding Sammy's squirming body to his chest and running running running. *Take your brother outside and don't look back.*

"Dean," says Cas from far away. His hand presses against Dean's chest, rubs a slow circle over Dean's heart, and it hurts. It fucking hurts. "Take a deep breath. Whatever it is you're seeing isn't real."

So, Cas thinks Dean's hallucinating again, but Cas is wrong. Because it is real. And Dean should never have run. He should have just stayed where he was, frozen in the doorway of Sammy's nursery and let the fire burn them up. Mom, Dad, him, and Sammy. Because the world would have been so much better off –

"*Breathe*, Dean," Cas orders, and he sounds worried now.

Dean finally realizes he's not breathing. Michael's holding his head under water again, and if Dean sucks in, fluid will fill his lungs, and he –

Hands find Dean's shoulders, pull him roughly into a sitting position, props his back against something sturdy. Something wiry winds itself around Dean's stomach. Cas's hand stays on Dean's chest.

Dean's breath catches in his throat. He's lightheaded. There's a whine of panic in the back of his head now.

Cas's voice is very near Dean's ear when he says again, "Breathe, Dean. You're alright."

A breath explodes out of Dean's lips. It hurts his chest, but his lungs immediately expand as he pulls in more air. Lights pop in front of his eyes. His head screams with pain. He's aware of strange, animal sounding gasps as he struggles to keep breathing.

Cas keeps rubbing his chest, holding Dean steady, and slowly Dean realizes that the something propping him up in bed is Cas's body. Cas is sitting behind him, one arm wrapped around Dean's belly, the other

arm pressed against Dean's chest. Cas is warm and sturdy and Dean is shaking. He doesn't want Cas to let him go.

Dean's body wilts. He hurts all over. His head aches; it's too heavy to hold up, so he lets it fall against Cas's shoulder.

They stay like that for a minute, waiting for Dean's breathing to even out. Finally, Dean's chest stops aching. His face is damp, and he's trembling, and he feels so fucking weak. He can't imagine sitting up on his own. He turns his head reflexively to hide his face, but he ends up sort of snuggling into the crook of Cas's neck, rubbing tears and snot all over his stubbly skin.

"Wh-what," Dean can barely get the words out. "What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"I believe it's called a panic attack," Cas says. And no shit, because it's not like Dean's never had them before. But why the fuck is it happening now? When Dean is literally an immobile lump in bed.

"Would you like to lay back down?" Cas asks after a moment. He's still holding Dean, and maybe all the physical contact should feel weird, but it reminds Dean a little about those few glorious moments in bed, all safe and warm, snuggled up to Cas before Dean ruined it.

And Dean doesn't want to lose that just yet. Even though he's selfish for wanting it, and it's unfair to ask it of Cas. But Dean still feels like he's tottering, like any wrong move is going to send him careening back toward overwhelming panic, and he can't – he can't –

"Cas –" his voice hitches. He doesn't know how to ask for this, and his voice is pathetically weak. "C-can you…?"

"Just tell me what you need, Dean," Cas says gently. And he doesn't sound like he'll be angry if Dean asks him to stay. He sounds like maybe he actually means it, when he says he'll be there.

It takes a few tries to make Dean's throat work. "…stay?" he whispers.

"Of course," Cas says at once. He sounds surprised, but not exactly like he thinks Dean's a weirdo for asking. "Here," he says, and shifts Dean slightly so he can wiggle out from behind him, then he lowers Dean back to the mattress.

Dean wiggles over slightly, but he has to rely more than he'd like on Cas's strength, because even that little movement makes him light-

headed. Then Cas lays lengthwise beside him. The cot is way too small for two grown men. They're definitely bizarrely close to each other, and Dean's momentarily glad to know Sam isn't here.

"Can I…?" Cas's hand hovers over Dean's chest, and Dean feels a rush of affection for Cas who, despite the fact that their hips are touching and Dean's shoulder is pressed into Cas's chest, still asks if it's okay to touch him.

Dean manages to nod his head. It's getting too hard to speak again. There's something squirming in his stomach that might be nervousness or discomfort or something else. Dean shuts his eyes and swallows, wanting to ignore it for a little while longer.

Cas lightly presses his palm to Dean's chest and runs his palm down the length of Dean's torso, and up again, and some distant part of Dean's mind realizes that he is quite literally getting a belly rub from an angel. And, in the course of his life, maybe it's not quite the strangest thing to ever happen to him.

Besides, it's kinda nice.

"I'm here, Dean," Cas whispers. "Just sleep." So, Dean does.

OOO

Three months before

"So, it's over," Sam says. His beer bottle lands on the table. "Really over." It's about the fifteenth time he's said it since Amara assured them the spell worked, Michael healed both Sam and Dean in the warehouse, and Dean, Sam, Eileen, and Cas took the Impala back home.

They're all in the kitchen now, sipping beers, mostly sitting in stunned silence. Eileen is sitting next to Sam, and Dean couldn't help but notice they're holding hands, but he figures he'll give them the night off from teasing; they've earned it.

Dean's sitting across from them. Cas had propped himself against the counter.

"Fucking over," Dean says. And he can't quite believe it. His chest gets weirdly tight when he starts thinking about it too hard, so he's mostly trying not to think about it too hard. After a couple more beers, that task will get easier.

Eileen shuts her eyes and leans her head into Sam's shoulder. Sam does the thing where he drops his head on top of hers. And it makes Dean's stomach lurch. He doesn't know why, but he thinks about Cas, and then immediately checks over his shoulder for the angel to – he doesn't know – share a knowing smile or some shit?

But Cas isn't there.

"You see where Cas went?" Dean says. He tries to keep his tone neutral. Because of course there's no reason to get fucking anxious. And Dean really needs to learn to stop getting so fucking worried whenever someone he cares about isn't in the same room as him.

"Dunno," Sam says, the lovesick bastard. "I didn't notice him walk out."

Chapter End Notes

> Writing about bb Dean and his childhood trauma always makes my heart ache in a different kinda way. I don't go as far with John Winchester as some writers do, but I still firmly maintain that what John put the boys through was 100% child abuse: complete with neglect, endangerment, emotional and physical abuse. I definitely think John hit Dean. Dean's expression when he tells Sam about Flagstaff is enough to convince me. But I don't think John ever hit Sam, or went farther with Dean than what John thought was necessary for discipline (which is bullshit, btw). But I also try to present a balanced view of John – one in which he was a broken, misdirected man, who made a helluva lot of bad decisions, but ultimately always tried to protect his boys, even though he was often way off-base about is methods. Mainly, I believe that the boys deserved better, but that better didn't necessarily have to come from an outside source (Bobby or Pastor Jim or someone else), but John, himself, could have been better if he'd done things differently.

> Ummm...also, after literally a decade of fandom-obsessed life in which all my friends were like, "you are such a Tumblr person I can't believe you don't have a Tumblr," I just got myself a Tumblr and I have no idea what to do with it??? If anyone wants to, like, connect (?) or whatever it is people do on Tumblr, please hit me up: @foolondahill17. Also, if anyone wants to tell me what the hell I'm supposed to do with a Tumblr, also feel free to let me

know XD.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See end note for spoilery content warnings (story tags apply).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months ago

Cas isn't hard to find, but Dean's stomach still loosens in relief when his familiar figure comes into view. Cas is standing outside the bunker, still in the night air, and looking up at the stars.

"Party too loud for you?" Dean says, and lets the bunker door swing shut behind him. The air is cool. There are crickets chirping in the field across the road. The bunker's location certainly can't boast spectacular views, but at least it's peaceful. Quiet. Still.

"Hmm?" Cas says, like he's just realized Dean's there.

"Come on," Dean says. "Why are you hiding? Spill." He nudges Cas's shoulder with his own.

Cas doesn't say anything right away. Dean watches Cas's silhouette against the night sky. He watches his Adam's apple bob, watches Cas lick his lips.

"Have you ever given yourself permission to be happy?" Cas asks.

It startles a laugh out of Dean's mouth. "Kinda heavy for tonight, don't you think?" Dean says.

But then Cas turns to face Dean, and he looks ridiculously earnest. All dark and brooding like he gets sometimes. His eyes are puppy-dog gloomy. His eyelashes are – and – fuck. They're standing, like, weirdly close for two guys having a casual chat out in the quiet night air.

And, it's that his beer bottle is damp, Dean tells himself, not that his palms are sweating. And he can't breathe because – because he's just damn tired from everything that went down today. And he's not thinking about how fucking beautiful Cas looks right now, all bathed in starlight and shit.

"Because, if ever there was a time that I could," Cas says, and he

swallows. “Now would be it.”

And then he just fucking disappears.

OOO

Present day

Sam storms out of the infirmary before he can fully realize that’s what he’s doing. It’s just like something snaps – Dean’s denial, Dean’s feebleness, watching Dean nearly die twice in two days – it’s all too much. And Sam can’t do it anymore.

So, he just turns on his heel and walks out. Part of him thinks he’s going to just walk into the war room, do a lap around the map table, come right back in and take care of the cleanup, but instead Sam just keeps walking, nearly careens directly into Cas, who’s holding a mug of coffee and looks surprised, and then immediately looks alarmed.

“Is Dean alright?”

“He’s – shit,” Sam says. “He’s awake. Can you just –”

Some sort of understanding passes into Cas’s eyes, and he immediately presses the mug of coffee into Sam’s hand.

“You should rest,” Cas says, brushing his fingers across Sam’s arm before disappearing down the hallway.

Sam feels about two-inches tall. Not for the first time he marvels at how much they don’t deserve Cas. Then, he realizes he’s just standing stupidly in the middle of the hallway so he kicks himself toward the kitchen, thinking idly about pouring himself four fingers of whiskey.

But then he remembers that they purged the bunker of alcohol, and, shit, because now Sam feels like a scumbag because all he wants to do is drink until he can’t think anymore when Dean is –

Fuck this.

And then he thinks about how much he wants Eileen to be there, but then he remembers that she took Jack grocery shopping because the only edible things in the bunker’s kitchen were cereal, bacon, peanut butter, and leftover soup.

So, shit.

For once, the bunker is quiet. Sam can't hear Dean screaming anymore, which is something. Hopefully that means they're on the upswing. Dean certainly seemed more cogent then he's been over the past twenty-four hours. Right up until Sam decided to fucking run out on him.

Sam remembers Cas handed him a mug of coffee, so he downs the whole thing in four large gulps that burn his throat because – crap – it's hot. The pain, plus the placebo effect of the caffeine, immediately make Sam more alert. And then he becomes aware of the fact that he's still pacing. Just walking around in circles in the kitchen like a caged tiger.

His head buzzes with a sort of crazed exhaustion, but his body thrums with energy. He knows it's the kind of last-dregs feel of being awake and on edge for too long. Lately he feels like that's his body's default state: a kind of mania that fizzes through his veins. It keeps him up at night and constantly looking for things to do during the day. It's like if he stops moving he'll –

He doesn't know.

Spontaneously combust?

Sam tries standing still for the length of time it takes him to count to ten. He gets to nine before he decides to go for a run.

He doesn't realize until he steps outside, wearing a battered pair of sneakers he found in his old closet and the sweatpants Eileen brough over for him to sleep in, that it's raining out. And it's cold. There's a miserable wind that cuts straight through Sam's hoodie and he immediately sets a hard pace to get his blood pumping and keep warm.

He lets his mind drift. The sound of his sneakers hitting wetly against the pavement fills his head. He doesn't have to think about Dean, or what the hell is happening between Cas and Dean, or what the hell is happening with Sam and Eileen because for some reason Sam just can't get it through his head that maybe she actually does want to be with him and that maybe they actually can make a go of this, and maybe Sam doesn't have to constantly be looking over his shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop –

And Sam doesn't need to think about Dean trying to kill himself. Or the soft voice whispering in Sam's ear – because it's not like Sam's never thought about before. Not seriously. He's never actually tried

anything. It's just been a random thought, scratching at the back of his head when things get really bad, something that reminds him, *hey? you know what the easy way out of all this would be?*

It's been louder when things get bad. Like really bad. Like Lucifer constantly popping up in his peripheral vision, or when Dean and Cas got sucked into Purgatory with Dick Roman, and Sam just drove. It was like something clicked off inside his head. *Alone* just slunk into every empty space inside his body, and he thought *why the fuck not?* Find the nearest cliff. Veer into the pathway of an eighteen-wheeler.

And then he hit that dog. And things slotted back into place with a sense of purpose: don't let the dog die. Get the dog into the car. Get the dog to the vet. Check up on the dog. Bring the dog to the hotel. By the time he started talking to Amelia, the dog was okay, and the voice was a whisper again.

Sam hears the whirr of tires through the muddy road before he spots the glare of headlights up ahead. Eileen's red Plymouth rounds a bend, and Sam steps off the road, watching the car approach.

Sam knows these roads well, and he recognizes that he's already run about five miles from the bunker. He's soaked through, with his hair matted to his face because he forgot to tie it up. He probably looks like some kind of pathetic drowned rat, and he inwardly winces when Eileen pulls her car to a stop beside him.

The passenger side window and Jack peaks his head out.

"Why are you out in the rain?" Jack asks, eyebrows creased in a way that will always remind Sam of Cas.

"Sam, get in the damn car!" Eileen yells, leaning across Jack. She looks concerned and a little pissed off. "You'll make yourself sick."

Sam's face burns. He's already started shivering in the wind and rain now that he's stopped moving. He is suddenly and acutely aware that this probably looks like a super irrational thing to do – and then he thinks about how they can only afford to have one Winchester go off the deep end at a time. Then he immediately feels bad because that isn't exactly fair to Dean. It's not like it's Dean *fault* for going off the deep end.

"Um, sure," Sam says. "Sorry." He pulls open the back door and maneuvers the collection of bagged groceries so he can make room for himself on the seat.

Sam can see that Eileen is trying to meet his gaze in the rearview mirror, but Sam looks at his sopping wet shoes. He's feels weirdly like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't have – which is stupid, because he'd just gone for a run, not on some kind of murder spree or something.

"Is, ah, Dean doing better?" Jack asks, craning his head over the back of the passenger seat.

"Better, yeah," Sam says shortly, not entirely sure if that's the truth. "Cas was with him. I just – ah – needed some air."

Eileen must be reading his lips through the mirror, because she frowns and says, "You couldn't have brough an umbrella?"

And, with a sinking feeling, Sam knows they're going to talk about this when they get back. Because Eileen is able to cut through his bullshit unlike quite anyone else he knows, and she, unlike Dean or Cas, is totally up to the task of calling him out on it.

Sure, Sam spends a lot of mental energy trying to get the people around him to spill about their feelings, but he's never had someone do the same thing to him until Eileen – and she's damn persistent.

Which is honestly a little uncomfortable sometimes. Sam never realized how much his whole, as Dean would say, talking-about-feeling-schtick was just a coverup so he didn't have to talk about himself until Eileen started digging into him. She insisted that the only way relationships ever worked out was through healthy communication and, it turns out, after years of living with just Dean and Cas for company, Sam was a little rusty.

It used to be something he was really good at. Mainly because Jessica was good at it. It took about three weeks for Sam to realize that the stony silences and slammed doors he'd picked up from Dad and Dean weren't going to fly with Jess. Not when she opened the door right up again and fixed him with fiery eyes and a set jaw. *Nuh-uh, you don't get to talk to me like that, and you don't get to shut me out.*

But Sam hasn't really had that kind of blatant honesty in more than fifteen years, now. Because it's not like open communication was Amelia and his strong suit. They did desperate, late night conversations when they were drunk or after having sex. Anything more than that and one of them would duck out with some kind of excuse, claiming still-bleeding wounds and *need-more-time.*

And is it normal? Sam wonders abruptly, to think about his past relationships so much when he's in the middle of trying to start a new one?

Eileen pulls her car into an open spot in the garage. Sam makes sure to grab all the grocery bags to make up for – he doesn't know. Make up for being some kind of disaster she had to rescue?

"Go shower," Eileen orders when Sam deposits the bags in the kitchen. "Jack and I are making sandwiches for lunch."

And Sam does what she says. He feels weird, like he's definitely miss-stepped here, and he's not sure how to fix it. But he's also barely holding his teeth back from chattering, so the hot water is welcome.

It helps clear his head a little. Makes him stop feeling like he needs to tear his skin off.

He returns to the kitchen to find Jack and Eileen laying out sandwich makings haphazardly across the kitchen, talking and laughing and practically acting normal. Sam's fairly sure Eileen's teaching Jack how to swear in ASL, and he's not sure how Cas will react to that, because he already disapproves of the vocabulary the kid's picked up from Dean.

The light atmosphere in the kitchen is such a novelty after the hell of the past few days that Sam just pauses in the doorway for a minute, not sure how to interject himself.

"Any word from, ah," Sam trails off awkwardly. Jack looks over his shoulder at him, smile drooping slightly, and Sam immediately feels bad.

"Dean's asleep," Eileen looks over, as well, and immediately answers Sam's unasked question.

"He should eat something," Sam says.

Eileen nods. "Cas is sitting with him. He says he'll wake him in a bit, but it's better if we let him rest."

Sam nods. And then a weird, heavy feeling settles into his chest, because Jack and Eileen obviously have everything well in hand in the kitchen and Cas is perfectly capable of watching Dean. And Sam's the one who walked out in the first place, so of course there isn't a place for him now. Because it's not like he does anything but yell at Dean,

anyway, like some kind of total jerk. Because that's really the last thing Dean needs right now.

Sam doesn't understand why he's all of a sudden so Goddamn angry about everything. Because he's been in situations he can't control basically his entire life. So why is this somehow so different? It's been years since he's felt so readily and uncontrollably mad at things. That was something he was supposed to have grown out by the time he reached his mid-twenties, so he doesn't know why the fuck it's suddenly back now.

"Sam?"

"What?" Sam barks and turns sharply on his heel. Eileen startles. She's holding a plate with a turkey sandwich on it.

"Sorry, fuck," Sam says at once. He puts his hand against his forehead and falls into a chair. He's somehow walked into the library. He hadn't realized he'd made the decision to leave the kitchen.

Eileen raises her eyebrows and approaches him. She claps his sandwich on the table in front of him and then draws her own chair.

She winds her fingers around his hand and pulls it away from his face; Sam lets her, even though it just increases his embarrassment by tenfold.

"What's wrong?" she says. She levels her gaze at him. Her eyes are large and earnest. God, she's beautiful.

And Sam doesn't fucking deserve her.

Sam takes a deep breath. "I think I should move back into the bunker."

Eileen's lips twist into a frown. But her voice is measured when she simply asks, "Why?"

"Because –" Sam stammers. "I just – because I can't just leave Dean like this."

"Okay…" she says slowly. And it clicks for Sam why she's frowning, and Sam kicks himself.

"I mean – just for a little while," he says, aware that he sounds desperate and is grateful for the fact that she can't hear him, even

though he's sure she can read it on his face. "Just until things are… better. Then I'll – come back."

Eileen takes a long while to nod. Something hard sinks into Sam's stomach. He hadn't meant for this conversation to go like this. He hadn't – shit.

"Eileen –" He pleads at the same time that she takes a deep breath and says, "Sam –"

She stops and smiles softly. She's still holding his hand, rubbing the back of his fist with her thumb.

"You – ah – you first," Sam says weakly, trying to smile back.

"I'm not going to stop you from doing what you think is best," Eileen starts. "But I need you to think about yourself, too, alright? What do you need, Sam?"

"Eileen, I –" Sam says. He doesn't know what to say, because there's a rising pressure in his chest that's making it hard to think about anything else. "He's my brother," he finishes weakly. And he thinks about all the times those few words have landed he and Dean and the world in so much trouble.

Eileen takes her hand away so she can sign *I know.*

Sam looks at his lap. He fights the temptation to put his head back in his hands by twisting his fingers together.

Eileen leans forward, she lifts his chin gently with two fingers. Once she's sure he's looking at her, she signs, *Talk to me.*

And it's easier, sometimes, to talk using his hands instead of his voice. It feels simpler, somehow, like he doesn't have to worry so much about articulating himself. It doesn't feel as exhausting.

Sam swallows. It takes a minute for him to steady his hands enough for him to reply, *I just ran away. I left him. I don't know* ¬– he doesn't know how to say it, so he ends up incoherently mashing together multiple signs, *I don't know what to do how to help if I can be here.*

Because listening to Dean flashback to Hell and to Purgatory and Michael, keeping up an endless litany of *not real not real* keeps making Sam look over his shoulder for Lucifer, kept him digging his thumb into his palm, kept him dodging nightmares of him murdering his

brother all night, or else afraid to leave Dean because when he came back Dean's eyes would be black and the infirmary would reek of sulfur.

"Sam," Eileen says. Sam stops looking at his tangled fingers and stares back at her face. *It's okay,* she tells him. *It's okay to be overwhelmed. Watching someone you love be sick is hard.*

Sam remembers that Eileen watched Lillian O'Grady die of cancer when she was sixteen, that she clearly understands what Sam's going through, and it isn't fair of Sam to shut her out.

You don't have to do this alone, she keeps signing. *You have Cas. And Jack. And me. Dean will be okay.*

Sam swallows hard. There's something burning like acid in his throat. And his eyes itch.

I don't know what to do. He signs again, fingers trembling so much he almost can't form the words. Eileen takes both his hands.

She leans close enough to him that their knees bump. "It's okay," she says. "It's going to be okay."

"I don't want to leave him alone," Sam says through his constricted throat. "But I don't – I don't want to leave you –"

"It doesn't need to be a choice between me and Dean, Sam," Eileen cuts him off firmly. "I don't want that from you."

It's the first time, Sam thinks, that someone he loved didn't ask to compete with Dean. Because Jess had been too much a part of Stanford to leave room for Sam's family. And, from the start, Amelia had been an all or nothing relationship. Maybe, Sam thinks for the first time and actually believes it, maybe he and Eileen can actually give this a shot.

Okay, he signs, and tries to smile, but he's interrupted when Eileen grins, eyes soft, and leans forward to kiss him.

OOO

Three months before

Dean stands there for a minute, not breathing. Slowly the world starts trickling back in: the crickets, the cool air, the smell of old tar and

dust, and the fact that he dropped his beer bottle and it shattered at his feet.

"Cas?" Dean says to the empty air, and it's not like it's the fucking first time Cas just up and disappeared, so it's not like Dean has any right to panic – except for the fact that this time Cas definitely doesn't have his wings or much access to his Grace so something has to be fucking wrong because Cas wouldn't just –

"Cas, man, where the fuck are you?" Dean says. He's whispering, even though it would make a helluva lot more sense to shout. But the sense of wrongness is permeable, now, and it settles into Dean's bones. Something's wrong.

Something's very fucking wrong, and Dean needs to get back to Sammy *now*.

Dean lets himself back into the bunker, races down the stairs to the war room, and shouts, "Sam! Get your ass in here!"

But Sam doesn't get his ass in there, so Dean keeps running. He rounds the corner in the hall and stops dead in the doorway to the kitchen.

Eileen is on the floor. There's blood on her head. It mixes with spilled beer and runs pink across the floor.

And Sam is standing over her, toeing her with his boot as though he's examining an interesting bit of evidence in a case. He looks up when Dean stops in the doorway.

Sam smiles, and Dean's blood runs cold, because it isn't Sam's smile.

"It's never over," Sam – not Sam – not fucking Sam – says. "Not until I say it is."

And Sam just blinks out of the bunker, and Dean feels like he's been punched in the stomach. Because first Cas and now Sam and no no no – it was *over*. It was fucking over.

On the floor, Eileen stirs with a groan. And Dean thought she was dead, so it takes him a minute to catch up to the idea that she's not. His entire brain seems to be lagging one step behind. After Cas disappeared and now Sam, Dean's tripping over himself to catch up.

Eileen blinks her eyes blearily and tries to sit up. It finally makes Dean move. He snatches a dishcloth off the counter and kneels next to

Eileen on the floor, offering her an arm.

“What happened?” she asks. Dean just blinks at her for a couple seconds before he registers that she spoke.

“I don’t – uh,” Dean stammers. And he realizes he’s shaking: all tense muscles and ready to spring at something, to fucking stage an attack against something that isn’t there anymore.

“One second it was fine,” Eileen explains shakily, accepting the cloth from Dean and pressing it against the cut on her forehead that’s slowly pumping blood down her face. “And then Sam – *changed* somehow. It wasn’t Sam anymore. He hit me with a beer bottle.”

“Chuck,” Dean manages to say before his throat closes up again. It’s like that time in the alternate apocalypse world, when Sam got killed by vamps and Dean suddenly couldn’t form words or thoughts anymore that didn’t center around *Sam’s gone. Sam’s gone again*.

Eileen shuts her eyes. “I thought he was gone.”

Apparently fucking not, Dean wants to say, but he can’t. So, instead, he grabs Eileen’s arm and helps hoist her to her feet. They have work to do.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning (spoilers): Dean’s recent suicide attempt triggers Sam’s memories of his own past suicidal ideation, including when Dean and Cas were sucked into Purgatory at the end of Season 7, before Sam met Amelia.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See end note for spoilery content warnings (all story tags apply).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present day

Dean knows he's awake. He can feel the stiff sheets under his fingers, hear the crinkling of the pillow under his head, see the glaring lightbulbs fixed into the ceiling. And there's Cas next to him, sitting up in the bed, and Dean's head is next to his thigh. Cas's fingers comb through Dean's hair.

Dean knows he's awake.

But everything feels wrong. Distant and foggy. Like he's half-way to being drunk, but there's no warm buzz. It's just weird. His body feels too heavy. His head isn't attached to his body. He lifts an arm clumsily, just to see if his body still reacts to directions, and it gets tangled in the blankets.

Cas shifts next to him.

"You're awake?" he asks.

And Dean knows he's awake. But he's groggy and disoriented. He doesn't remember why Cas is in bed with him. He's in a…hospital? No. He was in a hospital, but he isn't anymore. This is the bunker. He recognizes the bunker's infirmary from when Sammy was in here, when his weird God-wound freaked out and started eating Sam's lifeforce from the inside out.

"Dean?" Cas says.

Dean doesn't know how long he's been awake. His brain isn't working. Everything is too far away. His head hurts. His whole body hurts. There's something heavy on his chest that doesn't let him breathe right.

"Cas?" It comes out as a whisper because it's hard to raise his voice up his throat.

“Would you like to sit up?” Cas asks.

Dean wants to sleep again. Maybe when he next wakes up the strange film covering everything will disappear. He tries blinking his eyes. Maybe there’s something wrong with his vision. Maybe he can just shake it loose.

He’s cold. So fucking cold. He can’t stop trembling.

Cas grabs him under the arms and hauls him into a sitting position. Dean’s head spins. His stomach clenches. Cas props him up with several pillows.

“I’d like for you to eat something,” Cas says softly, and it isn’t a question. Dean knows he can’t argue, even though it takes a long time for the idea of *eat something* to condense into *food*, and the resulting nausea is bad enough that Dean’s afraid he’s going to be sick right there in the bed.

“Mmm no,” Dean says. He shuts his eyes, lets his head fall back against the pillows. He isn’t strong enough to sit up. He tries to swat Cas away, because he’s too close, but he can’t lift his arm again.

“It’s been a day since you’ve had anything,” Cas says sternly. “You need to start getting your strength back.”

Dean is able to swing his shoulder enough so he bumps into Cas beside him. “Get off,” he huffs, not quite able to form the proper words, but Cas gets the idea and slides off the bed. He takes a seat in the chair next to Dean’s bed. His hands dangle between his knees. He stares at Dean and Dean looks away. Cas looks strangely hurt. He also seems to be waiting for something.

“What…happened?” It takes a long time to drag the words out. It’s easier if he whispers, just takes a deep breath and shapes the sound of his exhale.

“You don’t remember?”

Cas’s concern makes a fiery mass of panic erupt inside Dean’s chest. He blinks hard. His throat is tight. He shakes his head because he doesn’t think he can say *no*.

“You…” Cas hesitates. “You overdosed in a hotel room. Sam decided it would be better for you to detox at home, so we took you out of the hospital.”

Oh. Fuck. Yeah. Dean remembers. It's hazy, but there.

"The last time you were awake you knew where you were," Cas continues uncertainly. "Do you…?"

"Fuck," Dean croaks. "I know, okay?" *I fucking remember* he wants to say, but his throat clogs up again.

"You should start with something simple," Cas says after a pause. He won't stop looking at Dean. "We have more soup."

Cas gets up and walks toward the infirmary door to get Dean's fucking soup. And Dean wants to tell him no, that he's not hungry, that merely the thought of food makes him want to puke. That he doesn't want to be fucking served in bed. That he wants to be left alone. But Dean can't even open his mouth now, and the frustration prickles at his eyes. So, Dean shuts them and lets himself slump against the pillows.

Maybe Cas will yell at him to sit back up when he returns, but Dean doesn't care. He doesn't want to be some kind of helpless invalid. He's so pointless. He's just this worthless piece of shit that keeps messing everything up and makes Cas concerned and makes Sammy so fed up that he left.

Cas is back much faster than Dean anticipated. Or maybe Dean zoned out for longer than he thought he did.

Either way, Cas glances his fingers over Dean's shoulder and Dean moves away from him. Cas snatches his hand away immediately. Again, there's that strange look of rejection across Cas's face. And Dean didn't mean to –

He just doesn't want anyone to touch him right now.

Dean pushes himself back into a sitting position. The muscles in his arms tremble from the exertion, but he can't stand the thought of being manhandled again. Not when Cas is carrying his soup on a fucking tray and keeps staring at Dean like he's some Goddamned drowned kitten.

"Here," Cas says, and puts the tray on Dean's lap. Dean just stares at it for a second: at the bowl, spoon, napkin, and glass of water. His hands shake. He curls his fingers into fists, and he doesn't want to try eating anything because he's afraid he's going to spill it all over himself, and Cas won't leave him the fuck alone.

Dean takes a deep breath, before he forces out of his lips, “What is this? Fucking suicide watch, or something?” And the anger helps a little, makes it so his throat doesn’t close in on itself in the middle of a sentence.

“We don’t want to leave you alone, no,” Cas says. And, fuck, yeah, talk to the angel who doesn’t know shit about lying.

“I’m not going to…” *fucking stab myself with a spoon,* Dean wants to say, but apparently one outburst is all he’s allowed. He pulls his hands into his lap, but he still doesn’t reach for the soup. He just looks at his hands. His fingers are long and pale. His fingernails are short and uneven. His veins stand out blue on the back of his fists. He curls and flexes his fingers, watching the joints pop in his knuckles, the skin pull tight. His knuckles are stiff and scarred after years of landing punches.

It’s weird to think of his hands as his. It’s like they don’t belong to him. It’s like it’s not him controlling them.

It feels like it did with Michael. The few times Michael let Dean come up for air, let him just watch someone else ride around inside his body and call all the shots.

Dean touches his thumbs to the tips of each of his fingers, mirroring the movement on both hands, feeling the ridges of his fingerprints. *This is me.* He thinks. *This is real.*

“Dean,” says Cas.

Dean looks up. He shoves the tray across his lap, and Cas reacts quickly to snatch it before Dean can push it over the side of the bed.

With Cas preoccupied with the tray, Dean pushes himself upward, swivels on the bed, and, heart thudding so quickly it makes him lightheaded, plants his feet on the ground. He’s wearing socks. The wool pair he keeps for winter, and he doesn’t remember putting them on, so that means Cas or Sammy did it.

And Dean doesn’t like it.

He doesn’t like the idea of Cas or Sammy undressing him or dressing him or washing him or whatever the fuck else they’ve had to do. Constantly starting at his body. Touching him.

“Dean,” Cas says again. He grabs Dean’s upper arm. Dean can’t stop his head from spinning for long enough to yank himself free of Cas’s

grip, so he reaches across and tries to ply Cas's fingers away.

"G'away," he murmurs weakly. And he hates how breathless he sounds, but that's all he can manage.

"Where are you going?" Cas says. His voice sounds like an order. Like Dad or some shit when Dean tried to turn away but he wasn't done yelling at him yet. *Look at me when I'm talking to you, boy.*

Yes, sir.

"Gonna…" Dean breathes, shuts his eyes, works his tongue around the word. "Shower."

He wants to be alone. He wants to wash away the past few days. He wants to stand under a hot stream of water and let the heat bleed into him, scald his skin, peel flesh from his bones.

"Let me help you," Cas says, and at least it's not a refusal. Because Dean doesn't have the strength to argue and he certainly doesn't have the words to explain why this is so important right now. He just needs it gone. He needs to be back in his own body again. He can smell himself and his hair is sticky with grease and his face itches from his stubble and he wants to be in different clothes in his own bed.

Cas won't let go of Dean's arm, so Dean grits his teeth. He nods his head, and Cas helps him stand. A minute later, Dean's glad for the support as the world spins under his feet and he almost lands in a heap on the floor.

Cas catches him with a hand to his chest, and suddenly his face is very close to Dean's.

"You should sit back down," Cas says.

"Just –" Dean tries to take another step forward, but it's clear that he's not going anywhere if Cas doesn't let him move. "Man, please."

"Alright, Dean," Cas sighs. He rearranges his arms around Dean, so he can better support him. And Dean doesn't want him to touch him, but Cas's arms are wiry and strong, warm and steady, and Dean definitely couldn't walk on his own right now.

Cas threads one arm around Dean's back, keeps another arm fixed against Dean's chest, and they make slow progress toward the door.

“Where –” Dean gulps when Cas opens the door and they step into the war room. Takes a breath. “Where’s everyone else?” He tries to sound casual, but he doesn’t think he can quite hide his note of alarm. There’s a momentary flash of panic when he thinks about Sam and Eileen and Jack inevitably waiting outside, and Dean doesn’t want to see them, doesn’t want them seeing him like this –

“Jack’s in his room,” Cas answers. “I left Sam and Eileen in the kitchen.”

Dean nods. He can’t make himself say *okay*.

It’s a slow shuffle down the hall. And the – the bunker is different. It’s fucking different. The lights aren’t working or some shit because everything’s dark and the air is thick. And Dean can’t get his bearings on anything.

It’s too much to ask that they won’t run into Sammy on the way there, and, sure enough, the kitchen opens as they pass, and Sam sticks his shaggy head out.

“Dean!” His voice is equal parts relieved and alarmed. “Should you be out of bed?”

“Gonna shower,” Dean says. And he doesn’t want to stand there talking. He doesn’t want to have to deal with Sam’s disapproval or concern. He’s suddenly acutely glad Cas is still there. Dean finds Cas’s elbow, holds it loosely because it’s hard to make his fingers work.

Sam looks Dean up and down and Dean wants to melt into the floor. Finally, Sam nods. “Sounds like a good, idea. You need any…?”

“We’ve got it,” Cas interjects and Dean’s gratitude unspools inside his gut so intently he’s momentarily worried he’s going to cry.

He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him.

They make it to the bathroom. Cas helps ease Dean against the sink, and then he hesitates. “Will you be alright on your own?”

And Dean feels a strange pulse of warmth inside his chest at the idea…because it doesn’t feel as awkward, somehow, to imagine Cas helping him stay on his feet in the shower. Not like it would be if it was Sam.

Because Dean could leave his underwear on. And it wouldn’t be weird.

Not like that. It would just keep Dean from faceplanting on the wet tile.

It would just –

And Cas asked if Dean would be alright on his own. And Dean doesn't know. Dean wants to – Dean wants to hurt himself. The thought is there suddenly and irrefutably. Dean wants to be alone because he wants to hurt himself.

The desire rises like a lump in Dean's throat. He hasn't felt like this in a long time. But the thought is there, buzzing in the back of his mind and impossible to ignore.

And if Cas was there, then Dean wouldn't –

Cas watches Dean with his deep, liquid blue eyes. Dean doesn't want Cas to worry. Dean doesn't want to be there in the shower with Cas, all warm, wet skin and –

"M fine," Dean mumbles.

Cas nods. He slowly releases Dean, as if testing whether or not Dean will stay on his feet. He takes a step back and nods again. "Let me know –" he starts again. "Just call if you need anything."

Dean nods. He looks at his feet, wonders how he's supposed to get his socks off without passing out, and he hears the door close as Cas leaves.

It's quiet in the bathroom. The air feels damp and cool. Dean never really stopped shivering, but he starts up again in earnest now, until his teeth chatter. He slowly bends at the waist, using the sink behind him for balance. He manages to tug one sock off, then the other. Then he unties the string of his sweatpants and pulls them down, along with his boxers, kicks out of the fabric, almost overbalances but catches himself hard on the lip of the counter. He picks off the medical tape attaching the pad of gauze to his forehead.

His head thrums with a dull ache; he can hear his pulse in his ears. Too fast. He struggles to pull his hoodie and t-shirt off.

Then he maneuvers toward one of the shower stalls, using the wall as a crutch. His bare feet hit the cold, damp floor and his skin rises in gooseflesh. He moves the faucet all the way to hot and then turns the valve. The steaming water slaps his body so hard he gasps and

staggers. He lands against the wall.

Then he just stands there. It's hot. It hurts.

Good. He wants it to hurt.

Pain is good. It keeps him centered. It stops his mind from careening off in strange directions, dragging him with it. It keeps him present.

He doesn't bother with soap or shampoo. He tries, but he can't close his hands around the bar and it slips to the floor. Clatters. And he worries that Cas or Sammy might barge in. His hair is way too long. It feels heavy on his head. He doesn't want to touch it. He doesn't want to touch his body. He doesn't want to think about his body. It disgusts him. It isn't really his. Not really. Too many people have put his hands on him, have turned him inside-out, have used him.

I own you. Before I'm done with you, I wanna hear you beg.

He doesn't know how long he's been in the shower. At least no one's come in to check on him yet, so he shuts off the faucet. He realizes he didn't grab a towel, so he just stands there for a minute, dripping until he starts shivering again.

His skin stings. It's red and raw from the hot water.

He staggers out of the stall, fishes for a towel on the shelf and drapes it over his shoulders. Then he pads over to the sink, where the mirror on the wall is foggy with steam, dripping with lines of condensation.

He keeps his razor in the drawer under the counter.

He looks at his face in the mirror. It's haggard and pale and waxy. There are dark shadows under his eyes. His chin is rusty with stubble. He doesn't look like himself. He doesn't remember what he's supposed to look like. There's a scab on his forehead, surrounded by a yellowing bruise. He looks a little like a ghost. Like something dead and decomposing.

The razor's in his hand.

Nothing feels real because it isn't real. Not really. Never has been. It's never really been *just Dean* in there. Behind those eyes. Ringed with red. Hidden in dark circles.

My name is Dean Winchester. Sam is my brother. Mary Winchester is my

mom. And Cas…Cas is my best friend.

He knows how to take apart his razor. He remembers how, when he was infected by the Mark, he used to slice his arm every day, just a little to check if the accelerated healing was still working, in case maybe…. And for a while in purgatory he kept track of the days by leaving scars on his arms. And after Hell. Because the pain was different. And he needed to be able to keep reminding himself it was different. That's how he knew to tell Sammy –

But it's been a while since he's done it. He hadn't needed to after – and, strangely, he suddenly remembers walking in on Jack, punching hole after hole into his chest with a knife to see whether or not he could die.

But his hands don't stop shaking. Because they never stop shaking now. Even though the booze is supposed to be out of his system, right? His finger slips when he takes the blades out, and a tiny spot of blood stands out on the tip of his thumb.

He presses the blade against the pale underside of his arm, pulls it across so it leaves a small trail of tiny cuts. Then he runs over it again, making one seamless slice.

There's no accelerated healing anymore. Because the Mark is gone, right? Right? Even though he sometimes wakes up with it tingling under his skin, threatening to emerge again. But he doesn't heal right away, so the blood pools out of the small cut, runs in watery stripes down his skin. It doesn't hurt. Not enough. Just stings a little.

And if the Mark is back, he thinks unevenly, does that mean Charlie's back, too? Maybe she isn't dead yet. Maybe there's still time to save her.

He draws another line on his arm, parallel to the first one. He sketches ladder rungs into his arm. One after another, climbing down to his wrist. And he can see the blueness of his radial artery. He's seen enough death. He knows how to do it right.

Someone's knuckles crack against the door. He doesn't startle; he's too far away to be surprised.

"Dean?"

Cas's voice. It takes a long time for him to recognize Cas's voice, to recognize that *Dean* means him.

“Do you need help?”

“M okay,” Dean says. He hopes he’s loud enough. He doesn’t want Cas to come in and see the blood. And he’s careful not to get blood on the white towel. He drops it to the floor and grabs his robe where it’s hanging on the back of the door.

Dead guy’s robe.

It doesn’t actually belong to Dean. Nothing here actually belongs to him. Dean’s just floating. A specter. Carried from one place to another like a cursed object.

He tugs the sleeve of his robe until he’s sure it covers his arm. He stares at the disassembled razor and doesn’t know how to put it together, again, even though he knows he’s done it before. So, he just fists the whole thing, stuffs the handle and the blades into the pocket of his robe, realizes he forgot to shave.

Then he brushes his teeth.

Opens the door.

Cas is waiting, looking worried, in the hallway.

“Would you like to go to your room?” Cas asks.

Dean nods. Cas takes his arm again. His fingers squeeze against Dean’s torn skin, and Dean hopes his blood won’t seep through the cotton; he doesn’t think he cut deep enough.

And they go to Dean’s room.

Dean feels a little steadier by the time he’s in clean clothes and his own bed, wrapped under his own blankets. He appeased Cas by drinking a glass of water, promised he’d eat something after he got his strength back, and then shut his eyes.

Cas let him get dressed on his own, but then he came back in to sit in Dean’s desk chair. Dean figures he has about zero chance Cas and Sammy are gonna leave him alone in a room full of blades and guns, but he still wishes they’d just give it up.

He wraps his hand around his left forearm, presses against the cuts there. The resulting sting is enough to draw him away. *It’s different,* he remembers telling Sammy when he was hallucinating Lucifer and

shooting at shadows.

It's fucking different. This pain is different than Hell. Different than Purgatory. Than Michael. It belongs to him. Dean controls it. It's his. It's real. And the fact that Dean can feel it means Dean's real, too. Means he's here: in his own bed in the bunker, and Sammy's there, too. Real. And so's Cas. And Dean thinks Jack's there, too.

Jack came back, right? They got him back?

And Mom –

No. Mom's dead.

Cas isn't dead. But Mom is.

Cas is – Cas isn't –

"Cas?" Dean whispers, just to make sure, because maybe he imagined Cas pulling out the chair at Dean's desk, lowering himself into the seat, crossing one leg over the other and leveling his gaze as Dean crawled into bed.

"I'm here, Dean," Cas answers.

Dean opens his eyes, looks over his shoulder. And Cas is there. Sitting in the shadows. So, Cas is alive. And Sammy's –

"Sam's okay?" Dean says. His tongue is clumsy. He hopes he sounds okay. That Cas won't worry.

"Sam's okay," Cas echoes. "He's with Eileen. Do you need him here?"

Dean shakes his head, presses his face into his pillow, breathes deeply. Someone's washed his sheets recently. It smells fresh. Clean. Safe.

Cas isn't dead. Sammy isn't dead. Dean isn't dead. This is real, he thinks, digging his nails into his arm through the sleeve of his sweatshirt. This is real.

OOO

"Cas says you didn't eat anything last night," the frown is clear in Sammy's voice before Dean catches sight of his brother's face. Sammy's got the pursed lips of his bitch face plus the puppy dog eyes going strong. He stands in the open doorway of Dean's room. Dean squints around the wash of light coming in from the hallway.

Sam's holding a bowl of something in his hand, and Dean hopes to God it isn't more of that fucking soup. Because Dean knows soup, and he knows fucking Progresso when he tastes it.

"Wasn't hungry," Dean murmurs. He lets his face drop back into his pillows, because his neck hurts from holding up his head.

"Tough," Sammy says, voice unsympathetic. He hooks Dean's desk chair with his ankle and drags it near the bed. It must be Sammy's turn to babysit Dean. He's also apparently playing bad cop. "If you don't eat anything, we have to bring you to the hospital for an IV."

Dean breathes into his pillow. *Stop,* he wants to say. Stop. Don't. Don't manipulate him. Don't act like he's a kid. Don't force him to do stuff by holding the hospital over his head. Don't. It makes his chest hurt. It makes him think about Michael, about how Dean said *yes.*

You said, yes, Dean, Michael reminds him, smile in his voice. *But I do love to hear you beg.*

"I'm serious, Dean," Sam says. And he is. Dean can tell. It's his fucking *I'm serious* voice.

Dean moves slowly, pushes himself onto his back, grips the sheets, and tugs himself into a sitting position, back against the headboard.

"So, what'll it be?" Sammy demands. "Food or hospital?"

Dean thinks that right about now, he's supposed to roll his eyes, grunt something about nursemaids, make a big show. But Dean doesn't huff. He takes the bowl from Sammy, drops it into his lap, and stares at its contents. It's brown and glossy; he doesn't immediately recognize what it is, but it isn't soup. He thinks about actually eating it. Tries not to be sick. Or cry. Or do anything else embarrassing.

Sammy's concerningly quiet; he was clearly expecting more of a fight.

But Dean's too exhausted to fight. He wants Sammy to leave him alone, but he doesn't want to go back to a hospital.

"It's, ah, ice cream," Sam says. "Chocolate."

"Okay," Dean whispers. He looks at the spoon. It looks so fucking heavy. All he needs to do is fucking grab hold of it. Lift it to his mouth. He doesn't even really need to chew. Just swallow. Dean can swallow.

“Eileen, ah,” Sam rubs the back of his neck. Dean can tell his brother is trying not to look at Dean, trying to give him the privacy to eat on his own time. “She used to give it to Lillian. When she was sick. It’s easy to get down. Lots of calories. And it’s sweet. It’s chocolate, man.” He finishes, a little desperately.

“Okay, Sammy,” Dean says. There’s something in his throat that stops him from breathing. He turns his head, puts one side of his face against the headboard. He doesn’t want to look at Sammy. Or at the fucking ice cream.

There are tears again. Slow and hot and impossible to stop. He’s crying *again*. And he hates it. He doesn’t know why this keeps happening. He’s never cried this much in his fucking life and why does it keep happing when Sammy is *right there*. When all Dean wants to do is disappear.

He doesn’t think Sam’s noticed, yet, but Dean can’t hold back a choked little hiccup as his chest constricts, and Sammy says, voice painfully soft and pleading, “Dean, man…”

Sorry. Fucking sorry. Dean tries to say, just works his throat noiselessly for a couple seconds before he gives up.

“It’s okay,” Sam says. He brought napkins with him, and he wipes Dean’s face with one of them. “Dean, it’s okay.”

Sam takes the bowl of ice cream back. He digs into it with the spoon, lifts the spoon to Dean’s mouth, and nudges Dean’s lips open.

Dean just needs to open his mouth. Let the spoon slide inside. Wrap his tongue around the coolness, the sweetness. Just swallow. Just swallow and let the cold relax his throat.

Sam scoops up another spoonful. Just open his mouth. Swallow. Repeat. Dean can do that.

OOO

Three months ago

“Cas,” says a voice from the darkness and Castiel’s eyes snap open. It takes a moment for his eyes to focus on the pale face swimming above him, but when he does, his heart twists so painfully, he gasps out loud.

“Jack!” He chokes. He sits up and wraps the young man tightly in his arms, tugging Jack’s face to his shoulder. Jack squirms for a minute and grunts in surprise, but Cas doesn’t let go. He is aware that his face is damp with tears. Slowly, Jack relaxes into the embrace.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Cas says with difficulty. And this – he knows – is what it truly means to be human: the loss, the hurt, regret, joy, and plethora of emotions too large to be contained within a single body. It is both terrible and wonderful at the same time.

Cas slowly relaxes his hold around Jack, and when Jack manages to pull away, his eyes are red. Jack is wearing the same clothes he died in, and Cas desperately tries not to think of the abomination Belphegor inhabiting Jack’s body.

“I was worried –” Jack begins. “That you wouldn’t have forgiven me.”

So much has occurred since the death of Mary Winchester. Cas has felt Jack’s loss so pointedly for so long, until it fused itself onto his being, that Cas cannot help it – despite the fact he knows Sam, and certainly Dean, will hate him for it, Cas lays his palm against Jack’s face and whispers, “Oh, Jack. There was nothing to forgive.”

“We’re in the Empty,” Jack explains after a minute, but Cas doesn’t need him to. He recognized the place immediately, the endless expanse of black void. The vastness of it is almost like a physical presence: so heavy it is like an oppressive blanket across Cas’s shoulders.

“How long have you been awake?” Cas asks.

“I don’t know,” Jack says, and shrugs. “I don’t understand how time works here.”

“And you’re alone here?” Cas asks. He clambers to his feet and looks around at the sprawling darkness. He doesn’t understand how Jack could find him, when the last time Cas was in the Empty, it had only been him and the Shadow.

“Not exactly,” Jack answers. “There’s something else here. The thing that followed us to heaven. And Billie’s dropped by once or twice. She told me to wait for a sign.”

“A sign?” Cas says. “What kind of sign?”

“Unfortunately,” another voice cuts in and the figure of a woman

appears, clad all in dark leather and carrying the familiar curved scythe. “I meant you, Castiel.”

“Billie,” Cas says. “You look –”

“Much better?” Billie guesses. “Considering the last time you saw me you stuck me in the back with an Angel-killing blade?”

“Um, yes,” says Cas, and wonders why is it lately that all his acquaintances choose to remember the uncomfortable and startlingly graphic ways in which Cas sent them to their doom.

“Your world is in grave danger,” Billie begins.

“No,” Cas protests immediately. “We bound God. He can’t touch us any longer.”

Billie cocks an eyebrow, as if to warn Cas from interrupting his again, and Cas falls silent. Jack pipes up, “What do you mean our world. Isn’t it your world, too?”

Billie shakes his head. “Death has no world. I am part and not part of every universe. Just as the Empty is the space between worlds. It belongs to all and none of them.”

“And, our world is in grave danger because…” Cas prompts her.

Billie smiles, but there is no mirth in the expression. “God is not bound as you initially thought. The wound in Samuel Winchester’s shoulder enabled him to return. Although, he is significantly weakened.”

“So, what?” Jack says, eyebrows furrowed. “Chuck is possessing Sam?” Cas feels ill at the implications of it. Immediately he thinks of Dean – how Dean might have reacted toward this newest use of his brother.

“More or less,” Billie says. “Sam is able to fight back, but not for long. You’ll have to act quickly.”

“How do we stop him?” Cas says at once.

Billie nods to Jack. “Him.”

“But why me?” Jack protests.

“Because you’re the perfect hybrid,” Billie explains. “Half human. Half

angel. You can access both Darkness and the Light. You will need both if you hope to destroy God completely."

Cas and Jack look at each other. Jack looks confused. Cas yearns to reassure him somehow, but he doesn't know what to say.

"How?" Jack says desperately. "How am I supposed to help when I'm stuck up here?"

Billie shakes her head. "I'm afraid I can't help you beyond this," she says. "I've already intervened too much."

Chapter End Notes

> Content warnings (spoilers): Dean cuts himself with a razor, and there's a veiled reference to sexual trauma

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> A gentle request to please not post religious/spiritual, political, or philosophical propaganda in the comments of this fic. There are more appropriate places for those types of discussions. Thank you <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present day

The food in his stomach actually manages to settle Dean's nausea a little. The ice cream didn't help warm him up, though, so he stays in bed, curled under multiple blankets. He drifts in and out of sleep for most of the day, wakes uneasily when he hears his door open and shut, mumbles answers to the questions Cas and Sam ask him. He lets Sam help him sit back up in bed at some point, actually eats the toast his brother brings him without coughing it up again.

Everything's still fuzzy and disorienting, so it's easier for Dean to keep his eyes closed, even if he can't really stay asleep for an extended period of time before someone comes to him, Alastair or Chuck or Michael, puts their hands in his hair and tells him that he belongs to them, now.

Every time Dean startles awake it takes him a little longer to focus his vision, to settle his heartbeat, and remind himself that he's in the bunker. He's home. He's okay. Cas or Sam are almost always there, swapping in and out. Sam keeps putting his hand on Dean's shoulder, and Dean doesn't want anyone touching him, right now, so he keeps shrugging away, trying to ignore the pulse of guilt as Sam mumbles apologies, tells him it's just me, Dean.

Cas always asks before he touches Dean, whispers his hand over his back, suggests softly, *can I put my hand on your arm? Are you alright if I touch your head? Help you sit up? Do you need anything?*

So, Dean nods, because he's given up on trying to talk anymore. And he likes the pressure of Cas's hand against his back, his shoulder, the back of his neck, or his wrist. It's warm and steady. Makes it easy to remember there's someone else there. Just Cas. Just Cas and he's not leaving.

At one point, Dean's eyes flicker open to find Cas dozing in the desk chair, chin slumped to his chest. And he looks so damned tired. He should be in his own bed, not worried about Dean, and it's not like Dean's going to try killing himself now. Not when he's so fucking weak, and can't even get to the bathroom without hanging onto Cas's arm like he's a life raft. He can see the sabers hanging on his wall, knows they're sharp enough to slice Dean's throat in a second, but the idea of getting out of bed, lifting the blades off their hooks, unsheathing the saber, pressing it to his flesh is just so exhausting.

"Cas?" Dean tries to call. It ends up a croak, but Cas must be attuned to Dean's voice, by now, because he immediately snaps his head up.

"Dean?" Cas says. "Do you need anything?"

Go to bed, man, Dean means to say, but when he opens his lips, nothing comes out. So, he shuts his eyes, lets out an exhale of frustration.

"Dean," Cas gets out of his chair, bends over Dean. "What's wrong?" And, fuck, Dean hadn't meant to freak him out. Dean hadn't meant for any of this. And Cas needs to fucking rest. Not spend the night worrying about Dean.

"Can you look at me?" Cas asks.

Dean turns his face back toward Cas. Cas's face is close. He's so – so – and Dean doesn't want to mess this up. He doesn't want to make another stupid mistake. "M…sorry…Cas," Dean whispers.

Cas's eyes soften. "You don't need to be sorry, Dean. You're sick. This isn't your fault."

And that's not true. Because of course this is Dean's fault. If Dean was better at taking care of his own shit, if he wasn't such a pathetic waste of space, if he hadn't fallen apart like some kind of pansy-ass wimp, than none of this would have happened, and Cas wouldn't have to be losing sleep watching Dean to make sure he doesn't slit his wrists or try to drown himself in alcohol again.

Of course, this is Dean's fault.

"I should, um, apologize," Cas says. He looks at the ground. "I'm afraid I…treated you poorly, Dean. I shouldn't have…asked from you what you weren't comfortable giving me."

It takes a minute for Dean to understand what Cas is talking about, and when he does, something swoops in Dean's stomach so violently that it takes away his breath. Because no. No. That hadn't been Cas's fault. That had been Dean's. For God's sake, Dean had kissed Cas, not the other way around.

But he doesn't know how to tell Cas; he can't even fucking interrupt the guy, so Cas keeps going.

"And I don't want to ever hurt you, Dean," Cas finishes, shamefaced. "So, I'm sorry. I don't take the privilege of your friendship lightly. And I won't ever ask you for more, if that's not what you're able to…or want to…"

For the first time in days, Dean's head is silent. Deathly quiet.

"What?" he croaks, surprise and disbelief enough to startle sound past the block in his throat.

His heart beats so quickly, he can't even discern individual beats. It's just a continuously building pressure in his chest. Because Dean doesn't – understand what Cas is trying to say here.

Cas looks up, and he looks confused, a little lost, like he doesn't know what Dean's asking.

"I –" Dean breathes, and now is about the fucking worst time for his throat to close in again. "I – don't –"

"I understand, Dean," Cas says swiftly.

And Dean shakes his head emphatically because fuck no. No, Cas doesn't fucking understand anything, right now. He doesn't understand how Dean can't keep his eyes off him. That every time Cas fucking speaks, something tightens in Dean's gut. That that morning it had just been too much. Too close. Waking up to Cas – too perfect – and Dean couldn't help it and – that was Dean's mistake.

Dean's fucking mistake.

It's Cas's turn to look confused. Dean's acutely aware that he doesn't want to have this conversation curled into the fetus position on his bed, so he shoves himself upward, sits against his headboard, flaps his hand impatiently for Cas to sit down, and Cas sits uncomfortably on the edge of the mattress, looking unhappy.

“Wasn’t –” Dean pauses to breathe deeply. He wishes he wasn’t such a total failure and had actually managed to learn sign language. It’d come in handy right about now. Because Dean doesn’t talk, not in the best of circumstances, especially not about something like this, and especially not with whatever’s happening to his voice. “Wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have stopped you,” Cas says.

It’s hard to look at Cas. It’s always hard to look at Cas. With his eyes like they’re lit by fire or some crap. Dean stares at his lap. Thinks about his hands again. About the callouses on his palms and the skin peeling from his cuticles.

“I – I,” Dean says. Tries again. “I made the first –”

“I didn’t know you knew what you were doing,” Cas says.

It startles something like a laugh from Dean’s mouth. Because, yeah, Dean knew what he was doing. He knew – for a long time he knew – Dean steadies himself with another breath, presses his teeth together.

“I’m not gay,” he says. He doesn’t know why it feels so important for Cas to know; it just is.

Cas nods, eyebrows furrowing immediately. “Of course. Because you also like women. You’re bisexual.”

Oh.

Dean’s never – never tried to put a label on himself before. Because no. He’s not anything. Whatever he feels for men isn’t – isn’t normal. Dean knows that much. He knows that it comes from someplace deep inside him, someplace that needs to be buried, because it doesn’t belong to him. It belongs to someone else: that kid with the mascara smudges under his eyes, safety pin through his nose, and the lime green highlights who waited until Dean was high before he put his tongue in his mouth, and that wasn’t Dean – wasn’t really Dean because a girl had her hand on his dick right before – so it wasn’t Dean’s fault that –

And with Lee – Dean could never even – not until he was drunk enough that he could barely remember in the morning. Drunk enough that Lee could just take over, just do whatever he wanted, and Dean wouldn’t complain. And it was a small price to pay to make sure Lee stuck around, to make sure Lee didn’t leave like Sammy had, like Dad

had.

And the other men – Dean only ever – that was for Sammy. Because Sammy needed money. Sammy was hungry. And it made a quicker buck than hustling pool or poker, especially in small towns where his fake ID wouldn't fly. Dean never – never

But there's no way for Dean to explain any of that to Cas.

He doesn't *want* to explain any of that to Cas. And it's not like Cas wants to know.

"I would like for you to know, Dean," Cas starts quietly. He's the one staring at his hands now. "That you are among the most precious people I have ever known." Dean's face burns. He wants Cas to shut up. Dean doesn't do this shit. "That I am grateful for you every day. And I don't want to lose you."

And, shit, because they're suddenly talking about that other thing, again, aren't they? Because Dean tried to tell Sammy that he didn't mean to kill himself, but he hasn't even tried to get that past Cas.

But Cas is wrong. Dean sure as shit isn't *precious*. Cas shouldn't be grateful for him, because Dean's done nothing but mess things up. That Cas, whether or not he'd ever admit it, would be better off if he lost Dean.

"Yeah," Dean says. "Okay."

He should make a joke or something now. Tell Cas to get back to his own room. He grabs his arm again, rubs his thumb hard into the cuts under his sleeve. They've scabbed over by now. The blades are still in the pocket of his robe. His robe is hanging on the back of the door. Dean can't get to it without Cas seeing.

"Can I get you anything?" Cas asks quietly.

Dean shakes his head. He inches back onto his side, curls up with his back to Cas. Maybe it will be easier to ask it if he can't see Cas.

"Can you – can –" *stay. Please stay. God, please stay*, Dean wants to say, but he can't. Because he doesn't want it. Not really. He can't want it. It's not his body.

"Just get out of here," Dean says. He hates himself. He hates – he hates that he made Cas's face crumble in disappointment, in hurt, and

concern. “I promise I – I won’t…” *won’t do anything. Won’t hurt myself. Won’t kill myself. Please go.*

Please – don’t –

“Alright,” Cas says at last.

Dean’s stomach plummets. He shuts his eyes because he’s afraid Cas will read the distress roiling inside Dean’s head.

“Rest, Dean,” Cas says. Dean’s memory foam mattress springs back up to fill in the empty spot Cas leaves when he gets off the edge of the bed. Dean hears Cas pause for a minute in Dean’s doorway, just staring. Dean worries Cas is going to say something else.

Or maybe – maybe he’ll change his mind, decide it’s too dangerous to leave Dean alone, after all. Maybe Dean can still –

Dean lifts his head as Cas closes the door to the hall. And then Dean’s alone.

OOO

Dean pads into the kitchen. He had to use the wall to support himself down the hall, but he managed to get all the way there without tripping over his feet or anything. And he didn’t want to have to call Cas. Not after the conversation they had the night before. Not after Dean told him to leave.

He never realized how cold the bunker was, with its stone floors and walls, the old and aching heating system that pumps stale air through the hallways. So, he’s got a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He knows he looks ridiculous, but his blanket is comfortable and warm, and he doesn’t mind the extra layer.

Jack and Cas are both standing at the stove, frowning thoughtfully at a pan of bubbling batter. Whatever it is doesn’t quite smell like anything Dean wants to eat.

“Dean!” Jack turns at the sound of Dean in the doorway. He beams. He looks relieved, and a little wary.

It’s been a while since Dean can remember seeing Jack. The kid’s been avoiding him, Dean thinks. Or maybe Dean’s been avoiding Jack. Dean isn’t sure how he feels about that yet. But he musters up a smile for him.

“Did you sleep well?” Cas asks, levelling his gaze at Dean. Dean shrugs, then half-nods. He hasn’t tested out his voice yet this morning, and he isn’t thrilled about his first try being in front of the kid. Truth is, he slept like he normally does: in bits and pieces, flashes of disconcerting nightmares in between, voices lingering too-long in the darkness.

Dean raises an eyebrow at the mess Jack and Cas have made of the counters. There’s flour everywhere, eggshells, and several dirty mixing bowls.

“I was, ah, trying to make pancakes,” Jack explains bashfully. “I don’t think I did it right.”

“I was trying to see if we could salvage anything,” Cas says with a wry smile at the mess.

The thing in the pan starts sizzling, and Jack jumps to try to get his spatula under it. He manages to flip half. The other half sticks to the pan. The bottom of the pancake turns out to be burnt black, smoking slowly, and Jack yelps, snatching the pan off the heat.

Dean’s lips pull. Nearly a smile. He breathes hard through his nose before venturing, “Too thick.” His voice is a croak, but at least it works. He clarifies, “the batter.”

“Oh,” says Jack, looking crestfallen. “I wanted to – I know you like pancakes.”

Warmth spreads in Dean’s chest, bubbles up his throat, fills his head. He blinks hard. He chews on the inside of his lip, and manages a nod, another smile.

He might not be sure how he feels about Jack, yet. But moments like these, when the kid is awkward and sweet and so fucking endearing – it’s almost easy to forget that this is the same kid that killed Mom. That almost killed Sam.

And Sam’s argued with him about it, reminded Dean that he did some pretty fucked up things when he was soulless, and Dean didn’t have any trouble forgiving him. But it wasn’t like Sam killed Mom. And Sam didn’t bring up all the terrible things Dean did while he was a demon, because Sam knows that Dean hasn’t forgiven himself for that, either.

“I can, ah,” Dean says, mustering his courage. “Here.” He steps

forward, takes the spatula from the kid. Dean brings the ruined pan to the sink, scrapes out the scraps of half-charred, half-gooey pancake and sets the pan in the basin to soak. Then he grabs another pan from where it's hanging from the hood of the center island.

Dean points at the bowl of lumpy batter. "Mix about another cub of milk into that," he directs Jack. "And, ah, whisk it. It's supposed to be runny."

Jack jumps to follow the order. He measures the milk out in a coffee mug, but, oh well, one step at a time, and then uses the whisk to mix the batter again until it's clear of lumps.

Dean's already feeling lightheaded from all the standing, and he doesn't think he can manage to make pancakes for all of them. So, he turns and hands the spatula to Cas.

"Pour just enough batter to cover the bottom of the pan," Dean says to Jack. He shuffles across the kitchen to take a seat at the table, blanket drawn tight to his chest. "Wait until it bubbles at the top before you flip them. And let Cas handle that part. I showed him how to flip burgers."

Jack nods solemnly, absorbing this new information, and Cas stands at attention near the stove. It feels almost okay, just sitting there at the table and watching them work, listening to them bicker easily about how much *bubble* means *bubbling.* Cas is good with Jack, all casual touches and easy grins, and Jack is more comfortable around Cas then he's ever been around Dean.

But then there's a thrum of strange pain deep inside Dean's chest. Dean tightens his grip on the blanket, trying to steady his breathing.

Because he won't ever have that. Sam has it with Eileen. Maybe someday Sam will have it with kids of his own – Dean's little brother is still plenty young enough to start a family. And Cas has it with Jack.

And Dean won't ever have it. Not again. He used to – with Sam. Growing up with Sammy. Teaching his brother how to drive a stick shift and how to use garbage can lids for sleds. And he almost had it with Lisa and Ben before Dean went and ruined it. And he can't get it back with Sammy, not when Sammy deserves to have a life with Eileen. And he can't have it with Cas – never – never be able to have anything with Cas because –

"Sam here?" Dean asks, because there's a rising pressure in his head

that tells him he needs to stop thinking about this right fucking now if he doesn't want to embarrass himself.

"He and Eileen decided to go back to their apartment last night," Cas answers. "He said to call if you'd like him back –"

"No," Dean says at once. Too quickly, he knows, by the way Cas lifts his eyebrows. "He, ah, deserves a break." He has a feeling Eileen's behind it – getting Sammy out of the bunker and away from Dean. So, he doesn't have to worry about his psycho older brother anymore.

Whatever good feeling was there a moment ago is gone. He lets Jack and Cas's comfortable babble drift into the background. He tries to stop his fingers from trembling again. Tries to keep a hold of himself, but he can already feel himself unraveling. And he woke up feeling not terrible for the first time in so long. For the first time his head actually felt marginally clearer. He could actually breathe without feeling like he was lifting a ton of bricks with his ribs.

But now it's all back. And he wants a drink.

He stopped himself for looking for his flask in his bedroom this morning. He knew Sammy and Cas had probably found it when they cleaned out the rest of his booze, but part of him hadn't wanted to know what he'd do if he did find it.

Because he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself. He wouldn't want to stop himself. It wasn't him who wanted to detox, after all.

Dean finds his arm under his blanket, squeezes hard, but the cuts have already healed enough that there's just a slight ache, now, nothing nearly sharp enough to distract him. He'll need to get on his own again soon, grab his blades, maybe a knife – he could use a knife, as long as he's careful not to cut too deep. He knows better than to nick a vein.

And it'll be easy to hide the cuts on his arms. He's always worn long sleeves. He's comfortable in layers. He started in school, when he had to coverup the mysterious bruises and cuts he'd get on hunts, knowing the rope burn and bruises down his ribs were a surefire way of getting CPS shoved down their throats. So, he learned early on to dress himself and Sammy in pants and long sleeves, even when it was too hot for jeans and flannel.

He remembers he was in eighth grade when he made a mistake, let his sleeve ride up on his arm, and a teacher must have caught sight of

something, because the next thing he knew he was pulled into the office by an earnest looking school counselor, who asked him to sit down, concern pinching her eyebrows, and she asked him about the scars on his arms, said something about coping mechanisms, how she knew pain could be a good distraction, but how it wasn't fair to hurt his body. He should snap an elastic band or bracelet on his wrist, instead, or hold an ice cube in his hand.

And Dean didn't know how to explain to her that he hadn't put the cuts there, himself. He couldn't tell her about ghouls or werewolves. Couldn't tell her that the ugly chaffing on his wrist came from being chained up in the basement of a hag in northern Vermont that wanted to eat his liver.

So, he just nodded stupidly, heartbeat pulsing hot in his throat, and told her he was fine. Perfectly okay. No. No, there wasn't anything he needed to talk to her about. Yes, he was aware she could notify Dad. But please – please don't. Dean would stop, he promised. He'd stop.

"Dean?" says Cas, and Dean's head snaps up. Cas is looking at him, plate of pancakes in one hand, and his expression suggests that it wasn't the first time he called Dean's name.

"I – yeah, thanks," Dean says quickly. Cas slides the plate of pancakes in front of Dean. Dean snatches up his fork and knife, cuts into the stack. They're still a little soupy in the middle, but whatever. He tastes them; too much baking soda, but it's nothing a little maple syrup won't cover, so Dean forces a smile, shoots Jack a thumbs up, "They're great."

Jack beams. Dean eats mechanically. He's not hungry, but he can't afford to stop eating again and make Cas worry, make him call Sammy again. So, Dean eats. Maybe not what he'd normally eat, but enough not to raise an eyebrow, and it's all he can manage without thinking he's going to have to run to the bathroom and throw up.

After breakfast he heads to the shower. He actually washes his hair this time. And he remembers to shave. Takes a pair of clippers to his hair until he looks marginally human again. Then he makes a few extra slices into his left arm with the razor. He starts up on his right arm, too, to make the stinging pain symmetrical. And it's easier to center himself. Sort of like meditating. Just breath in through his nose, out through his mouth, and cut.

OOO

Cas doesn't know what to do with himself.

Jack has taken refuge in his bedroom, where he is scrolling through something called Twitter, which Sam has tried to explain before has nothing to do with birds. Cas is, admittedly, a little nervous about Jack spending so much time on the internet. Cas knows enough about the internet to understand that it contains a plethora of strange, confusing things and multiple naked bodies.

It isn't that Cas hasn't exactly gotten around to explaining the intricacies of sexual intercourse to Jack, yet, it's just that he doesn't think he did a very good job of it. Secretly, he had hoped Dean might speak to Jack about it. Dean, after all, knows so much more about sex than Cas does.

But Jack does at least understand the mechanics now. Sex, Cas tried to explain, usually involves the insertion of an object into a human being's many orifices, sometimes multiple objects at once. But sometimes it does not involve insertion, at all. It can, instead, just involve rubbing, or touching, or grabbing.

Typically, it involves two people. But it can also involve three or more people. A sexual act involving four or more people is called an orgy. It can also just involve one person – this is called masturbation. Sex can occur between men and women, women and women, men and men, or multiple gender iterations, including nonbinary people.

Good sex, Castiel explained, involves pleasure. Pleasure is complicated, because all human beings experience pleasure in different ways. Some experience pleasure through pain, others through gentleness. Some prefer to dominate a sexual experience, while others prefer to submit, and still others do not have a preference.

Sex is also a means of reproduction – this occurs when sperm from a penis fertilizes eggs released by ovaries. But sexual reproduction may not be the end goal of all sexual activity; in this case, those involved should use one or more of various forms of birth control. Also, humans should be careful to protect themselves from sexual transmitted diseases or infections.

And Cas made sure to educate himself on the social graces of sex, as well, so that he could teach Jack that each person involved should be above a certain age marker of adulthood, that everyone should ask each other before engaging in any sexual activities, that no one should

proceed with sexual activities unless everyone involved agreed enthusiastically to all actions. That it was better to not engage sexually with people if mentally inhibited by drugs or alcohol.

Cas tried to explain that some people find sex more satisfying when engaging with a partner with whom they have an emotional connection, but not everyone finds this to be the case. Cas, certainly, can't speak from personal experience. He's had an emotional connection with a limited amount of people – perhaps ten – and he hasn't had sex with any of them before.

And, of course, there are also people who are uninterested in any kind of sexual activity. These people, instead, may prefer other types of physical or emotional intimacy.

"You understand?" Cas asked Jack afterward.

Jack's eyebrows furrowed. "I think I'm confused."

"It is confusing," Cas agreed. "And we can talk about it again, if you have questions."

He and Jack haven't talked about sex since. Cas is afraid he might have overloaded him with information – but, after the nearly disastrous occurrence between the teenage bookstore employee and her zombie boyfriend, Cas had simply wanted to make sure Jack received the information from a trusted source.

But Castiel doesn't know why he's worrying so much about sex.

He doesn't understand quite what happened between him and Dean the night before. Castiel had meant to clear up any misunderstandings between the two of them, but it seems like he just made it worse.

Cas understands why Dean might have emphasized the fact that he wasn't gay, but Cas doesn't know why Dean seemed to take offense to the idea of being bisexual. Cas had assumed – but maybe that's why. Maybe Castiel shouldn't have assumed anything.

After all, everyone doesn't like labels. Cas doesn't know how he should sexually label himself. He knows he's not homosexual, because he finds women sexually attractive, as well as men. But he might find nonbinary or genderfluid people attractive, too, he just hasn't spent much time thinking about it.

Mostly he finds Dean attractive, but Cas doesn't think there's a

sexuality for only finding the people who don't want to have sex with you attractive.

Because Cas doesn't know if Dean's go had simply meant leave for the night, or leave entirely.

Of course, Cas can't exactly leave entirely. Dean might not like it, but Sam and Cas decided that it's best not to leave him alone for too long, just until they're sure whatever this psychological crisis is has passed.

Cas can't leave the bunker, but he doesn't know whether he's allowed to go back into Dean's room. He wants to find the balance between protecting Dean and respecting his privacy; but Cas doesn't know how to do that when the person he's trying to protect Dean from is *Dean*.

So, Cas tries to think of ways he can make Dean come back out of his room. It was good that Dean emerged voluntarily this morning for breakfast, but, since then, he again retreated behind his closed door, and Cas's starting to get worried. He knocked several times to offer Dean food or further assistance, and Dean answered each time, so he knows Dean's physically alright. But Cas doesn't know what else to do to coax Dean out of his mental shell.

Cas tries to think about forms of nonsexual intimacy Dean likes to engage in – playing cards, shooting pool, hunting, of course, but that's off the table for now, boardgames, watching movies – Cas knows Dean like old movies with cowboys, or detectives, or laser swords. But he likes cartoons, too. And comedies.

Cas takes out his phone, types into the app for internet searches "funny movies," but then he thinks that maybe Dean isn't in the mood for anything funny, because Cas doesn't want him to feel obligated to laugh. He backspaces his search and types instead "star wars movies," and he comes up with several results for something called *The Mandalorian* and pictures of "baby Yoda," which looks like a good combination of *Star Wars* and a cartoon.

Before he can think better of it, Cas gets up from the library table and walks down the hallway to Dean's room. He knocks, and tries to ignore the pulse of panic in his stomach as he waits for Dean to reply. Part of him will never forget the heart-stopping moment of coming into that motel room with Sam to find Dean unresponsive on the bed.

Dean grunts, "Yeah?" from behind the door. His voice is croaky from lack of use.

Cas lets go of a small sigh of relief and eases the door open. Dean's room is dark inside. Dean's still on his bed. He hasn't seemed to have moved all day. He's wrapped in the same blanket he had around his shoulders at breakfast. Cas isn't used to seeing him look so small and vulnerable.

"I wondered if you –" Cas clears his throat, suddenly feeling strangely nervous. And he tries to remind himself that asking to watch television with either Sam or Dean is not exactly a novel occurrence. "There is a show called *The Mandalorian.* I understand you enjoy *Star Wars.* I thought you'd like to –"

Dean levers himself onto his elbow. It's hard to read his facial expression in the darkness, but at least Cas made him sit up.

"You, um," Dean starts and then stops. Dean shaved this morning and trimmed his hair, so he looks a little bit more like the Dean Cas's used to. But he's still much too pale. Too thin. And too quiet. "I didn't think you liked them. The original trilogy."

"I just didn't understand them," Cas clarifies. It's true, Sam and Dean made him watch the movies some time ago. The two brothers had hyped the trilogy so much that, by the time Castiel saw them, he couldn't quite reconcile Dean's boasts of *the best movies in the Goddamn world* with the slightly corny and flashy melodrama on the screen. But Cas did finally understand why Dean found Han Solo so intriguing.

"Okay," Dean says. He's not smiling, but he looks a little more alert. He rolls onto his back and pushes himself against the headrest. "My computer's on the desk."

And Cas is fairly certain that means he's allowed back into Dean's room, so he steps inside and grabs Dean's laptop before approaching the bed. He's unsure for a minute whether he's allowed back on the bed, but Dean's sitting to one side, and there's plenty of room for Cas to sit, too, without having to worry about pressing up against Dean's body, so Cas climbs in and puts the computer on his lap.

It takes a minute for them to sign up for the streaming service and find the television series, but soon enough the opening credits are playing, and Dean's face glows from the light of the laptop screen. He isn't quite looking at the monitor; he's just staring straight ahead at nothing.

"I didn't think about bringing snacks," Cas says uncertainly. Every other time he's watched movies with Sam and Dean, it's involved

snacks.

“S’okay,” Dean says dully. “Not hungry.” And it makes concern stir in Cas’s core again, because he doesn’t think Dean’s eaten anything since the pancakes this morning.

Castiel can’t exactly concentrate on the show. He’s worried that Dean’s uncomfortable; he keeps sliding farther down the headboard, like keeping himself sitting up is too much work. Cas is stupid – he should have realized Dean would still be tired. His body’s still recovering, after all, and he’s probably trying to keep himself awake for Cas’s account.

But Cas doesn’t know how to suggest leaving now that the show has started. And, the memory foam mattress sags a little in the middle, so despite Cas’s best intent, he keeps getting sucked in closer to Dean, and, because Dean keeps shifting, he’s sort of pressing up against Cas’s side by now. Cas doesn’t want to move because he’s worried he’ll make Dean even more uncomfortable.

But Cas’s arm has also fallen asleep by the time the Mandalorian finds the Child, and then the second episode automatically starts playing before Cas can ask whether Dean wants to keep watching.

And Cas knows from all the reading he’s done about sex that he’s supposed to ask before he touches people, and maybe that’s why Dean always took so much offense to the idea of encroaching on personal space. Which is why Cas always asks Dean, “Can – can I put my arm around your shoulder?”

Dean lifts his chin. His eyes skate across Cas’s face, again not entirely latching onto anything, before drifting back in the direction of the computer.

“Okay,” he whispers.

Cas doesn’t know whether maybe Dean’s going back to not speaking, again. Cas’s been around when it’s happened before – when Dean gets too overwhelmed with emotion and shuts down, can only run on autopilot.

But it was an *okay,* so Cas extracts his arm from between them and lays it across Dean’s shoulders. Dean shifts slightly, maybe on instinct, to fit himself into the space under Cas’s chest and arm. And Dean feels a little like dead weight, like he can’t hold himself up anymore.

Under his palm, Cas can feel the steady rise and fall of Dean's belly as he breathes. Soon enough, Dean's head droops onto Cas's lap and he falls asleep like that. And Cas doesn't let him go. For now, this can be enough.

OOO

Three months before

As soon as Billie leaves, the Shadow appears, like it had been unwilling to be in the same space as her. For a moment it exists as an amorphous black figure, before its shifts and bubbles into something strange: at one point it is an uneasy mirror image of Cas, himself, and at another moment it looks uncannily similar to Jack. Castiel wonders if, perhaps, it is confused by the idea of confronting two figures at the same time and cannot make up its mind about which to imitate.

"What have we here?" It hisses, facial features shifting between Cas's furrowed brows to Jack's perturbed grimace. "Two of you now?"

"You went back on our deal," Cas says to the Shadow. "You promised you would take me if it meant leaving Jack alone. He's supposed to be in Heaven."

The Shadow grins, and it is an alien imitation of Castiel's own smile, but Cas also notices Jack's chin, the particular, stiff way Jack holds his body. "Only souls can go to heaven, Castiel," the Shadow says, and Cas's stomach twists unpleasantly with the implications of its words.

"Now," it continues, taking a step forward. "Are you two going to be good little sleepers and go back to bed. Or will I have to send you back myself?"

"No," Jack says, and he's begun to shake slightly. His eyes flash gold. "You won't touch him."

Chapter End Notes

> So, I 100% set out with the intention of making this a fluffy interlude before more shit goes down in the next chapters, but I actually managed to turn pancakes and watching Star Wars into angst. And I can't make up my mind whether the fanfiction gods would be ashamed or impressed.
>
> That said, "sexual education according to Castiel" was super fun to write.

I also want to make sure that it's clear that Dean's doubts about his sexuality stem from his trauma, not his sexuality in and of itself. Dean's attraction to men is not a direct result of the trauma he's experienced; instead, it's just an unfortunate fact that his bisexual awakening coincided with a nonconsensual encounter. Thus, he's always conflated the two.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> I like to structure my stories like a hurricane: start hard and fast, move into the eye of the storm (a lull, maybe a bit of drizzling), and then get bombarded by the other half of the spiral. Anyway, the last few chapters were the eye.
>
> See end note for spoilery content warnings (all story tags apply).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months ago

Cas is aware of light. And heat. And then a tug from the depth of his stomach, a jolt as he loses his footing and everything around him slips away. And he falls.

Then everything is dark. But it's a one-dimensional kind of darkness, unlike the dome-like void of the Empty.

Feeling comes back to him slowly. He is lying on his back. He can feel cold wind. There are pebbles and coarse sand under his hands, digging into the back of his neck.

Cas feels his chest rise and fall, and he knows he's alive again. There is something undefinable in the different sensations between being alive or dead, but also impossible to ignore.

Cas opens his eyes. He stares at towering pine trees and hears the near lap of water on a beach.

"It's where I was born," Jack says softly. Cas sits up. Jack is standing on the shore, very near the waterline so that the Willapa bay laps against the toes of his sneakers. Cas recognizes the place now: it's the cabin in North Cove, the same place he brought Kelly to have her baby. Cas glances over his shoulder and sees the cottage the two of them rented. There's an oval of dead grass in the front lawn that must have been where Dean and Sam built his pyre. Where they watched his corpse burn.

Cas picked the cottage for Kelly because it was so peaceful. It is natural, perhaps, that Jack should choose this particular place to return to.

“We should go,” Jack says uneasily. “Try to figure out –”

Jack’s voice is cut off by the appearance of a woman in a dark dress. Amara throws her long hair off her shoulder and smiles.

“Jack,” she says. “I thought it must be you.”

Castiel and Jack stare at her in silence, unsure whether she’s friend or foe in this moment, unsure of how she knew where to find them.

“We can sense the arrival of a Nephilim,” Amara explains, as if she could read their minds. “My brother, in his weakened state, will not be able to pinpoint your location like I can. But he will undoubtedly be searching for you.”

“Because he’s afraid of me,” Jack guesses.

Amara holds Jack’s gaze for a moment before nodding. “Yes.”

“Billie said I’m the perfect hybrid,” Jack continues. “That I can fight him because I can access both Darkness and Light.”

“It’s true,” Amara nods. “Nephilim are unique among creation in that they contain both a soul and Grace.”

“But Jack’s soul is –” Cas hesitates on the word gone. It is something he has tried to not think too hard about, but something the Shadow’s words made erupt back into Cas’s mind with a flare of panic.

“Jack’s soul is split,” Amara interrupts. “Part of it still remained after he destroyed the archangel Michael. What exists now is nothing more than a sliver.”

“Then we’ll have to find a way to get it back,” Cas says, fighting against the contrasting impulse to be relieved that not all of Jack’s soul is destroyed and also the damning implications of the phrase *nothing more than a sliver*.

“We can’t,” Jack says. “If it was destroyed. Donatello explained that lost souls don’t exist anywhere. They simply disappear. Reconvert into the energy of universe.”

Amara raises her eyebrows. “That, nephew,” she says. “Is not entirely true.”

Cas and Jack look at her. Cas is the first to speak, “Where do they go, then?”

Amara smiles. “Into me.”

“What do you mean?” Jack says at once, uncertain.

“Souls are my lifeforce. Just as Grace is my brother’s,” Amara explains. “In order to use the power of souls, my brother had no choice but to imprison me. To suck me dry with his creation.”

The knowledge slips into Cas’s stomach like an ice cube. It’s as if he knew all along, yet couldn’t muster enough courage to face it.

Amara grins. “I can see you understand now, Castiel. He’s stealing your Grace. And the Grace of all the remaining angels. It’s the only way he can keep himself from getting any weaker.”

“But if the angels fade –” Castiel begins, but he can’t finish: *then Heaven falls*. And so would begin – as Dean would perhaps term it – Ghostpocalypse 2.0.

“Indeed,” Amara says.

“So how do we stop him?” Jack asks.

“I’d hoped binding him would be enough,” Amara explains. “I didn’t foresee this hiccup with Samuel Winchester.”

“So, we’ll have to kill him?” Jack guesses, and Cas is eerily reminded of the time when Jack asked why they bothered protecting Dean when he was possessed by Michael, because what was one human life against millions?

Amara cocks her head. She stares at Jack with a curious expression. “Killing my brother would, of course, also mean killing Sam.”

Jack just nods. Something tightens in Cas’s chest. He wonders how much longer he can possibly protest that Jack is okay when he so clearly is not. When at any moment he might again teeter over into another Mary Winchester situation.

“And you,” Cas says to Amara. “It would also mean killing you.”

Amara smiles. “Balance,” she says. “If you cannot imprison him, then you must kill him. And if you cannot kill him without upsetting the balance of the Darkness and the Light, then you must also kill me. This is a lesson, I think, you’ve already learned.”

“And you’ll do that?” Jack says tentatively. “You’ll let yourself die if it

means stopping your brother?"

"Let myself die?" Amara says, and she laughs. "I'm afraid you misunderstand me. Binding my brother, I had no issue with. But killing him? Especially at the cost of my own life? Oh, no. That I am not prepared to do."

OOO

Present day

Cas wakes abruptly with a crick in his neck, and doesn't immediately comprehend what's woken him except to understand that there's a deep pit of anxiety in his stomach. Then Cas realizes that he's not in his own bed, but Dean's – crammed uncomfortably up against the headboard, and Dean's laptop has slid off Cas's legs, so it's flipped over on its side on the mattress and the screen's fallen asleep.

Cas immediately thinks that Dean must be having a nightmare, so he reaches out a hand on instinct to find Dean's shoulder, but Cas's hand touches empty air and he understands that it wasn't Dean's presence in the bed, but his absence, that woke Cas so suddenly, already half-way to panic.

Cas sits up and blinks sleep out of his eyes. Dean's side of the bed is still warm and the door is open, spilling a triangle of hallway light onto the bedroom floor. Dean can't have been gone long. He probably just got up to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water, or maybe he couldn't sleep and didn't want to disturb Cas. There are multiple acceptable excuses for his absence, so Cas shouldn't panic.

Still, there's a tight knot of fear in Cas's abdomen, and Cas knows something isn't right. It isn't that Dean's praying again – not like he had been when he went missing and wound up in that motel room – it's more like a constant buzz of anxiety in the back of Cas's skull, and he can't quite parse whether it belongs to Dean or himself.

Cas slips out of bed and pads across the room, eases out of the door. He doesn't see Dean, so he walks down the hallway, thinking of Dean's usual haunts: the library, the gym in the cellar, the garage, the kitchen.

The kitchen is the closest, so Cas turns off at its door, shoves it open with his shoulder and blinks into the darkness beyond.

There's someone standing in the center of the room, near the island.

Cas can tell, even in the darkness, that it's Dean.

"Dean?" Cas whispers. He doesn't want to startle him, but he wants to ask him if he's alright, ask him what he's doing, tell him to go back to bed.

Dean doesn't answer.

Cas fumbles for the light switch on the wall and the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling flicker to life.

That's when Cas sees that Dean's holding a knife, just staring at it, and Cas's heart stops beating.

"Dean –" Cas chokes, not sure what to say, but the fear is a corporeal thing – something alive and snaking through his chest, squeezing so tightly it hurts.

Dean whips around like he's on a spring. Cas lifts his hands to chest height on reflex, but Dean doesn't raise the knife. Dean looks startled, but not like he's about to lunge forward.

"Cas – wait," he says, and Cas doesn't know what he's supposed to wait for. Dean takes a step back from him. "I – I wasn't…" and maybe a part of Dean acknowledges how alarming it must be for Cas, to wake to find Dean standing in the middle of the kitchen with a knife in his hand. "I just – I just wanted to –"

"Dean," Cas starts, calm and slow, even though his blood is chilled. "Can you put down the knife?"

"I –" Dean swallows. He takes another step back. Cas wants to step after him, but Dean's backing himself into a corner and Cas doesn't want him to feel threatened, not when he's still holding a blade. "I don't know – I don't want to, Cas."

"Did you have a nightmare?" Cas guesses. Dean's eyes dart around the kitchen in rising panic. There's a fever flush in his otherwise ghostly face. "What are you seeing right now, Dean?"

"I – I can't," he says, voice helpless. "This isn't r-real," he stammers. He runs the hand not holding the knife through his hair. "I don't think you're real."

The knife Dean's holding isn't one Cas recognizes from the stash in Dean's room – Sam and he had debated about removing all Dean's

weapons, but had ultimately decided that confiscating the weapons might be more upsetting then the resulting risk. Besides, they'd agreed to watch Dean closely. Neither of them had really expected he'd try anything else.

Stupid stupid stupid, Cas tells himself furiously. He's so stupid for not being more careful, for not cleaning out every single weapon from the bunker, or for not keeping Dean somewhere where Cas could be sure he couldn't hurt himself.

"Of course, I'm real, Dean," Cas says. "I'm Castiel. I'm your best friend. You're in the Men of Letter's bunker. You're just having a hallucination."

"No," Dean moans and shakes his head. The despair in that single word threatens to bring Cas to his knees. Tears glisten in Dean's eyes and his chin trembles. "No. Not a hallucination. He said it wasn't real – n-nothing's fucking real. And he's going to make me hurt Sammy – h-he said he's going to…."

"Dean," Cas says, and he doesn't mean to speak sharply, but Dean still flinches. "Chuck's dead. Jack killed him. This is real. I promise it's real."

"Not," Dean insists, voice constricted. "It's not, Cas. It never has been. Everything's just a big fucking joke and – and I'm so t-tired. So f-fucking tired, Cas."

"We can talk about this," Cas swallows past the sharp knob sitting in his esophagus. And if he had his Grace is would be so easy: just a wave of his hand. A gentle push and the knife would be across the room. "Put the knife down, Dean."

"I don't want to hurt Sammy," Dean protests. He sways where he stands; for a moment Cas thinks he's going to get lucky and Dean's going to faint. "He – if I'm gone than – than his plan won't work anymore. I don't – don't let him use me anymore, Cas."

"I won't," Cas promises. "But first you need to let me have the knife."

Dean shakes his head again and takes another step back. He hits the counter. Almost like he's talking to himself, he whispers, "It's not real. Not real. Not real."

"Will you let me call Sam?" Cas asks wildly, desperate for anything to make Dean calm down, knowing that the one thing on the earth able

to do that will be his little brother. “Dean, please.”

“He won’t leave me alone,” Dean whispers desperately. “They won’t – I can’t – they’re everywhere, Cas.” He’s shaking hard. The knife trembles in his hand.

Cas’s still too afraid to make a move. He wonders if it’s possible to lunge forward and knock the knife out of Dean’s hand, take advantage of his surprise, but he knows it’s a bad idea. It would likely result in both of them getting hurt. He knows Dean is practiced at handling a blade. He knows Dean knows exactly where to cut himself to make it so there won’t be anything Cas can do.

“I’m not going to watch you kill yourself,” Cas tries to put every ounce of authority he can muster into his voice. “So, drop the knife.”

Dean sucks in a hard breath. His chest convulses and his face crumples. Cas takes his opening and darts forward, counting on the fact that Dean’s distraction will lower his response time.

The blade flashes and Dean hisses in surprise or pain, Cas can’t tell. But then both his hands close around Dean’s wrists, hard, and he digs his fingers into Dean’s flesh until Dean flinches. Dean yelps pitifully, and Cas knows he’s hurting him, but the first order of business is getting him away from the knife.

Cas hears a clatter of metal against the floor. Dean’s face is very close to Cas’s. There are tears stuck to Dean’s eyelashes. His pupils are blown wide with terror, and Cas’s chest aches, because he isn’t sure if Dean’s scared of Cas or of something Cas can’t see. Dean starts shaking his head, and doesn’t stop. “Not real,” he chokes, and tries to tug away from Cas, but Cas doesn’t let go. “It’s not real. Not real. Please stop.”

“I’ve got you, Dean,” Cas says, sure the man can’t hear him, but he has to say something. “It’s going to be alright.”

Dean’s legs buckle, and then he’s sliding down against the counter to the ground. Cas kneels with him. He fishes for the knife on the ground with his foot, finds it, and kicks it across the floor. He doesn’t turn to see where it ends up, but keeps his eyes fully on Dean.

Dean pinches his eyes shut. “S-stop,” he moans. He lands in a crouch, dangling his hands between his knees, and gulps air.

“I’ve got you, Dean,” Cas says. He loosens his grip on Dean’s wrists, gently inches his hands around Dean’s fingers instead. “You’re okay.

Just breathe."

Dean's eyes are still closed, breathing rough and uneven. Cas takes deep, calming breaths of his own, hoping Dean will unconsciously follow his pattern.

"Cas?" a small voice says from the doorway. Dean doesn't react to it. Cas whips his head over his shoulder and sees Jack; he looks horrified.

"Get the knife off the floor, Jack," Cas orders, voice shockingly steady. "And then call Sam. Tell him Dean's alright, but it's an emergency."

Jack immediately does what Cas says, picking up the knife and rushing back to his room for his cellphone.

"Your brother's on his way," Cas says calmly. Dean still doesn't seem to be hearing him, but at least he's stopped muttering under his breath. "He'll be here soon. Let me –" Cas swallows down his wildly beating heart. "Let me check your arms."

Cas doesn't think Dean managed to cut himself, and he doesn't see any blood, but he wants to make sure. Cas reaches for Dean's sleeve, but Dean flinches hard and wordlessly moans in protest.

Cas catches him around the wrist again, presses firmly in a way that he hopes comes across as comforting rather than restrictive. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to help, Dean."

He goes for the sleeve again. Dean doesn't object, but he lets his head fall back against the cabinets behind him. He blinks up at the ceiling.

Cas rolls up Dean's sleeve and bites his lips against a gasp, because Dean's arm is striped with cuts. None of them are so fresh that they're still bleeding, but they've all obviously been made in the last two days. He rolls up Dean's other sleeve, and it's the same thing.

"Oh, Dean," Cas sighs. He wants to cry. He knew Dean's used pain before to bring himself back from the brink. How could he not? And Cas really should have expected something like this, now that he and Sam took away Dean's alcohol. He was going to need another crutch.

Dean's breath catches in his throat in a little hiccup. "Cas, I think I'm going crazy," he whispers, and he sounds marginally more like himself. "It won't stop. It won't fucking stop."

"I know," Cas says. He lets go of one of Dean's wrists. He presses his

palm to Dean's cheek, instead, takes it as a good sign that Dean doesn't cringe away, and thumbs away the tears coursing down Dean's face. "You're not crazy, Dean," Cas says decisively. "You're just sick, alright? You need help."

Dean drops his chin to his chest. He sucks in a shuddering breath. He draws his free hand up to his face, covers his eyes. Cas can tell he's more aware now, that he knows where he is, that he's probably embarrassed. "I-I don't know what's wrong with me," Dean whimpers into his hand.

"It's going to be alright, Dean," Cas continues, soft and soothing. He keeps one hand on the side of Dean's head, the other wrapped around Dean's fist.

"I don't want to be here, anymore. C-Cas, I don't –" Dean takes his hand away from his face and runs it, shaking, through his hair again. He winds his fingers into his hair and tugs.

"Dean –" Cas says. He moves his hand to grab Dean's, pulling it away from his hair. "I'm here. I've got you."

"Sam's on his way," Jack whispers from the hallway. Cas startles at the sound, turns to give Jack a nod of thanks, and then immediately addresses Dean again.

"Can you stand?" he asks into the suddenly, unnervingly still and silent kitchen. It feels like the moment after a car crash: his ears are ringing and time is frozen still.

Dean doesn't answer. He takes a deep breath and exhales, and for a moment Cas thinks he's going to say something, but he doesn't. Cas grips Dean's forearms and applies pressure, standing with Dean. Dean sways again, but he catches himself, leaning slightly against Cas.

Cas isn't entirely sure how much he's allowed to touch Dean right now, but he takes it as a good sign that Dean doesn't protest Cas's hand still holding his, doesn't shrink away from the arm Cas tentatively slips around Dean's back to keep him steady.

"Come with me," Cas directs softly. Dean follows Cas's lead, still silent.

Cas doesn't want to bring Dean back to his room, not with the guns and sabers on the walls, so he brings him to his own room, instead. Cas immediately wonders if that was a mistake, when he flicks on the

light inside the door and sees that every surface of his room is covered in a thin film of dust, that the air is still and cold with an unlived-in quality. Cas remembers that he hasn't slept in his own bed for some nights now.

But Dean doesn't say anything. He doesn't give Cas any indication he even knows where he is. Cas leads him to the bed, and Dean sits unprompted.

"Do you need anything?" Cas asks.

Dean mutely shakes his head. *Dammit, Dean, talk to me,* Cas wants to scream, wants to shake him, wants him to understand how scared Cas was. But Cas swallows these impulses. Instead he sees that Dean's shivering slightly, so Cas reluctantly lets go of Dean, goes to his closet where he keeps extra blankets folded for the particular cold months, and returns.

He drapes the blanket around Dean's shoulders, remembering how Dean had insisted on doing so while Cas struggled against Rowena's mad dog curse, despite the fact that Cas literally felt like his brain was boiling inside his skull.

Dean doesn't acknowledge Cas or the blanket. He just blinks at the floor. Cas's stomach hurts. His body feels heavy and tired, the adrenaline that hummed through his body a minute ago is swiftly slipping away. He sits on the edge of the bed with Dean, making sure not to crowd him.

"I'm sorry," Dean whispers. His voice is shot. He doesn't look at Cas.

"You don't need to be sorry," Cas says.

"You should check on Jack," Dean says. "He was pretty freaked." Dean doesn't say *I scared him,* but it's in his voice anyway, the same way *you scared me* is in Cas's voice.

"I'd like to stay here with you," Cas says.

"I'm not going to grab a knife again," Dean says tonelessly.

"I'd like to stay here, anyway," Cas answers. He'd like for Dean to believe that Cas trusts him, but, truthfully, Cas doesn't know what he trusts right now.

Dean doesn't reply. They just sit there in heavy, staticky silence. The

minutes tick by. Dean doesn't stop trembling, but he's otherwise completely motionless.

Cas is relieved when he finally hears the distant slam of the bunker's front door, and Sam's clunky footsteps as he charges down the interior balcony. A moment later, he hears muffled voices as Sam no doubt meets Jack in the hallway and is directed to Cas's room.

Sam appears in the doorway, breathing hard. And it might be Cas's imagination, but Dean might shift slightly closer to Cas on the bed, as though edging away from his brother's direct line of sight.

"What happened?" Sam pants, he looks a little wild, and Cas wishes he would calm down. He doesn't want to set Dean off again.

"It's alright, Sam," Cas says calmly. "Dean's alright."

Sam doesn't appear to hear Cas. He kneels in front of his brother and grabs Dean's hands sharply. "Dean? Hey, man, look at me," Sam prompts, but Dean slides his eyes away from his brothers, turns his head slightly toward Cas, and for a second Cas thinks Dean's going to hide his face in Cas's shoulder.

"Sam," Cas tries again. "He had a knife, but he's fine. He didn't hurt himself," he explains when Sam turns widened eyes to Cas. Cas wishes they could discuss this somewhere else; he doesn't like talking in front of Dean like Dean isn't even in the room, or he can't hear them.

Sam swallows, shuts his eyes and takes several steadying breaths.

"Okay," he says quietly, like he's making an internal decision. "Okay," he says again, eyes back on his brother. "Listen to me, man," he says. "I know you're not going to like it, but we need to bring you to a hospital, okay?"

Dean's chest heaves, but he doesn't speak. He nudges closer to Cas again, until their legs touch, and Cas reacts instinctually, slinging an arm around Dean's back.

"Sam," says Cas carefully. "Are you sure?"

Sam gulps, but nods. "I'm sure," he says to Cas. And then he says to Dean, voice softer, almost pleading. "We just – we need to figure out what's going on with you, man. Okay?"

Dean doesn't say anything. He doesn't give any indication whatsoever

that he comprehended what Sam said. Sam meets Cas's eyes. He looks frightened. Cas is acutely aware that he might be the only thing standing between both Winchester brothers and total collapse.

"Can you get Dean's shoes and coat?" Cas suggests calmly to Sam, and a momentary look of gratitude passes across Sam's face at the idea of someone else giving him direction. Sam nods and stands.

"I'll be right back," Sam mumbles, and then leaves Cas and Dean alone.

OOO

Time moves slowly and then too fast. Dean isn't one-hundred percent sure what he's doing or where he's going. He's in the war room, wearing a jacket he doesn't remember putting on and wearing boots that are laced too-loose, and he has a vague recollection of Sam on his knees at the foot of the bed, tying the knots, but he's not sure that's right.

Dean catches a glimpse of a white face watching him. Jack, maybe, and Cas says reassuringly, "We'll be back soon."

Cas has a hand on Dean's arm, and Dean wants to tell him that he can fucking walk on his own, but the words don't come, so he lets Cas guide him up the flight of stairs to the front door and out to the frontage road. Lets him bring him to the passenger side of the car – Sam's car – not the Impala, and wait for him to climb into the seat before closing the door for him.

Then time moves weird again and they're driving, Sam's eyes fixed on the road and hands white-knuckling the steering wheel. And Cas is – Cas is in the backseat, braced forward with his hands on his knees.

Dean's heart beats to the sound of the voice inside his head, keeping a terrified rhythm of *not real not real not real*, and he doesn't know, at this point, what's real and what isn't.

He thinks he remembers holding a knife, pointing it at his arm, thinking about blood. He thinks he remembers Cas pleading with him to drop the blade. He doesn't remember how he got into the car. But he knows he frightened Cas and Sam and Jack. For a terrible moment he can't remember what happened to the knife, can't remember whether anyone got hurt or not.

"I'm sorry." His voice is barely a breath, but he hears it inside the

painfully silent car.

“It isn’t your fault, Dean,” Sam says like it’s reflex, and Dean doesn’t believe him.

Then Sam does something strange; he takes one hand off the steering wheel and squeezes Dean’s knee. Dean looks at Sam’s hand and doesn’t know what to do, wants to bat it away or take it in his own, but he doesn’t have the strength to lift his arm.

Dean slumps in the car seat, tries to think about something else besides the insistent *not real not real not real* thudding through his head. But there’s nothing else to think about. Nothing matters. Everything is fake. Cas is fake. And Dean never should have let Cas get close to him, because none of it is real. And everyone Dean gets close to dies. Everyone leaves.

“Dean,” Cas says steadily, and his pale face comes into focus in front of Dean’s. He’s crouched in front of him. Dean’s in a hard chair in a too-bright room and there are too many noises around him: ringing telephones, rattling gurneys, low moans of pain, beeping monitors.

People die in hospitals, Dean thinks, before the fact that he’s in a hospital sinks like a knife into his chest. So maybe he’s dying, or maybe someone else is dead, and maybe Dean killed them. He kills so many things.

“Dean,” Cas tries again. His eyes are rounded with concern, and Dean’s done something to him; Dean can tell, even if he can’t remember what he did. He just knows he’s hurt Cas again. Like that time with the Mark. Beat him bloody. Felt the bones snap under his fists. All he ever does is hurt him.

“Dean Campbell?” says a man’s voice. Another figure drops in front of Dean’s eyes, a man with a blond beard and a white coat. “I’m Dr. Jorgensen. Can you tell me why you’re here?”

It’s a patient question and the doctor waits patiently for an answer Dean isn’t going to give him. Dean looks away from the son of a bitch, not sure how he knows he’s a son of a bitch, he just knows. The man stops Dean from turning his head by putting a hand to Dean’s temple, firmly leading Dean’s glance back to his face.

“Dean, do you know where you are right now?”

Fuck off, Dean wants to tell him, but it all feels like too much effort.

No fucking point. He could laugh, except the air in his chest is too heavy to lift through his throat.

“It’s called catatonia,” the man explains to Cas and Sammy. “How long has he been like this?”

“Since we, ah, got into the car?” Sammy says hesitantly.

“It was before that,” Cas says. “Soon after the – ah….”

“The psychotic episode?” the doctor prompts. Cas nods. The man turns back to Dean, fixes a stupid, sympathetic smile on his lips. “Dean, you’re in the emergency room. I’m a psychiatrist. We’re going to move you to the psychiatric unit, alright?”

A doctor for nut cases because Dean is clearly a nut case. He’s going crazy. He’s insane. He’s probably been insane this whole time and no one’s had the heart to tell him. Or maybe no one is actually there. Nothing’s real. *Not real not real not real.*

The doctor is talking to Sammy and Cas again. They’re all standing and Dean can’t hear them well. Their voices travel lazily through his ears and swirl inside his head, don’t make any sense.

“Because it was a suicide attempt, he qualifies for a 5150 psychiatric hold…we’ll keep him here for psychiatric evaluation for seventy-two hours…afterward we’ll discuss impatient treatment options…. visiting hours are from four to five every afternoon…we’ll take good care of your brother, I guarantee it.”

“Hey, Dean?” It’s Sammy this time. So close Dean could reach out and touch his face. “Hey, man. You’re going to be alright, okay?”

“We’re going to bring your brother to the psychiatric unit, now. Don’t worry, Mr. Campbell. He’s in good hands.”

“Cas? Fuck – I don’t….” Sam says desperately, and Cas puts his hand on Sammy’s shoulder, says something Dean can’t hear.

Then Dean’s in a different chair, being pushed through the halls and he dimly registers that he’s in a wheelchair and he doesn’t recognize where he is. He can’t remember saying goodbye to Sammy or Cas, and he doesn’t seem to be with them anymore. That thought sticks painfully in Dean’s chest, raises a flash of panic that threatens to choke him, but then the heaviness settles back over his mind and he doesn’t care. Doesn’t care because it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter

because it's *not real not real not real.*

They roll him into a room. He doesn't know who's pushing the chair, some nurse or orderly maybe who's chattering incessantly and Dean doesn't know what they're saying. He doesn't remember changing, but he's wearing a paper shirt and pants. He doesn't know where his clothes went, thinks he can vaguely recall the nurse mentioning *no personal effects in the emergency ward but we'll keep your things in a locker.*

There's a bed in the room, a couple medical monitors, and nothing else. The walls are clean white and the lights hurt his eyes.

Then he's in bed, and the bed is warm and surprisingly comfortable, even if the hospital smell threaded into the sheets makes Dean gag. He hears a rattle beside him and sees they've got him hooked up to an IV, and maybe that should alarm him, but he's too tired to be alarmed, so he shuts his eyes and lets the drugs pull him away to darkness and silence.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warnings (spoilers): here's the height of Dean's psychotic break, it involves another suicide attempt (he doesn't actually hurt himself, he just gets ahold of a knife) and self-harm imagery.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See end note for spoilery content warnings (all story tags apply).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present day

It's the same hospital they brought Jack to when he was dying. It's the closest general hospital to the bunker, about a half an hour drive. Last night, Sam got there in under twenty minutes. They've been to the emergency room enough times over the years that some of the staff look familiar, but luckily no one in the psych unit catches Sam's attention or seems likely to chat.

Sam can't stop moving. He paces the waiting room floor; he and Cas are the only ones there, because visiting hours aren't until that afternoon, but they're early because Dr. Jorgensen wanted to talk to them about Dean. And Sam doesn't know what the hell the doctor could possibly want or why the receptionist couldn't have just told them over the fucking phone.

Cas sits with his legs and arms crossed. There's an open *Southern Living* magazine in his lap, but he's silently tracing Sam's progress across the floor.

"Shit," Sam comes to a stop in front of Cas. "We shouldn't have brought him." The words burst out of Sam's lungs because he can't hold them back anymore. It's a mistake. A damn mistake. Sam knew it was a mistake as soon as the doctor said they were taking Dean away, now, and they told him Sam wouldn't get to see him again until the meager visiting hour the next day.

Sam didn't sleep at all the night before when they had nothing else to do but drive back to the bunker. He'd almost forgotten to text Eileen that he wouldn't be back to the apartment. So, Sam had plenty of time to think over his colossal, unforgivable mistake.

Dean was going to hate it. Dean was going to hate it so Goddamn much. In his state, Dean wasn't going to understand shit about what was happening to him – was going to lash out in fear and anger – and then what? What if he hurt himself? What if he hurt someone else? The staff would be mad to keep him there for just seventy-two hours.

They'd get a judge involved and make Dean stay for longer. They'd send him to a fucking facility, and Sam would have to break him out –

"Sam, stop," Cas says, and a hand snatches Sam's arm. Sam almost reacts violently, half-raises his fist to retaliate before he notices that its Cas, eyebrows drawn over his solemn eyes. "You should sit down," Cas says.

Cas looks unruffled and patient, just like he always does. It makes Sam want to hit something.

"We shouldn't have, Cas," Sam insists. "What the fuck were we thinking?"

"Dean needs help," Cas says heavily, but firmly. Despite his protests back at the bunker, Cas now appears entirely resolved; he and Sam have switched places. "Help that we can't provide him."

"You guys didn't dump me in a place like this when I was – you know, after all that Cage crap," Sam objects. "I could have at least afforded Dean the same dignity –"

"Yes, but you ended up in a psychiatric unit, regardless," Cas says measuredly. "Where they only tried to help you."

"Yeah, fat lot of good it did me," Sam spits bitterly. He tries not to think too hard about his time in the psych ward, where he felt like he was drowning in Lucifer's endless voice, wave after wave of sleepless torture. Totally unable to tell the different between what was real and what was the Cage. He felt like his very atoms had been unspooling, and he was powerless to do anything to stop it.

Cas goes silent, staring at his hands. And, shit, because maybe Cas's is thinking about the fact that the only thing that ultimately got Sam out of that place was Cas absorbing his trauma into his own head. And Cas was only able to do that because of his Grace. And Sam's a total douchebag for reminding Cas that Cas doesn't have access to that same Grace, now, so he's utterly unable to help Dean. And shit.

"Cas, I –" Sam starts desperately.

But Cas looks up, smiles grimly, "I understand, Sam," he says firmly. And Sam thinks that maybe he really does. That Sam's being unfair for assuming he's the only one in this room totally out of his mind with worry about Dean. "You care deeply about your brother. So, you worry whether or not you're making the best decision for his care.

But, either way, that decision is made now."

Sam takes a deep, steadying breath. And when it gets caught in his chest, he tries again. "Okay," he says meekly.

"Mr. Campbell?" Sam spins on his heel and sees Dr. Jorgensen is there, holding a clipboard and looking grave, just like every other psychiatrist Sam's ever met. "If you and your friend would follow me," he suggests.

Cas catches Sam's eye for a minute, passes him a reassuring glance, and the two of them set off after the doctor.

Dr. Jorgensen leads them to his office, where he waves them to two seats before dropping behind a desk. Sam can't help but remember the time he and Dean checked themselves into that mental hospital for the wraith case. It feels surreal to be playing the role in real life.

"Is, ah, Dean doing okay?" Sam says. A minute ago, he'd been prepared to start demanding information as soon as he saw the doctor, but now he feels strangely diminished. He's almost afraid to ask. He knows his brother got wheeled away only about six hours ago, but also knows that Dean could do a lot in six hours.

"So far, he's alright. He's sleeping, and we're settling him in. We've given him lorazepam – a sedative. The important thing is to keep your brother calm and quiet. Catatonia usually resolves itself with care and rest in a few days. In rare cases, we will apply electroconvulsive therapy –" Dr. Jorgensen hastens when he spots a flash of panic across Sam's face, "We won't do so unless absolutely necessary, I promise."

Sam nods. He suddenly can't speak. He doesn't remember a lot about his own brush with electric shock therapy – just to remember it was terror and pain all rolled into one – but he's also not stupid and tries to reassure himself that if it comes to it, Dean's won't be performed by a sadistic demon, but a totally human doctor who's trained, and Dean will be under anesthesia anyway, and –

"Is it alright if I call you Samuel?" Dr. Jorgensen says.

"It's Sam," Sam clarifies.

"And *Castiel* –"

"Yes," Cas answers.

Dr. Jorgensen raises his eyebrows, “And you are Dean’s friend…?”

“He lives with us,” Cas says. He hesitates. “With me and my son.”

“So, you aren’t related to him?” Dr. Jorgensen clarifies.

“No, I –” Cas says uncertainly.

“But Cas is family,” Sam interjects quickly. “It’s okay for him to stay.”

“I’m afraid that, due to confidentiality concerns…”

“They’re partners,” Sam blurts out. “Common-law.” Sam’s eyes flicker toward Cas in an apology, but he figures Cas won’t mind the white lie if it means he gets to stay, because no way is Sam doing this on his own. Sam just has to make sure it doesn’t get back to Dean.

Dr. Jorgensen nods. “That’s alright, then,” he says. “First of all, I understand some of these questions may seem intrusive, but please keep in mind that we’re simply trying to figure out Dean’s best treatment options. Of course, you’re under no obligation to answer anything, but your honesty will be very appreciated and helpful. We’re all just trying to help Dean.”

“Okay,” Sam breathes, trying to ignore the pulse of irritation he feels toward the doctor because of fucking course they’re all just trying to help Dean. This guy has no fucking clue how much Sam wants and needs to help Dean. Cas nods mutely beside him, already doing his best Tommy Lee Jones impression.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to start out by asking you a little more about this morning, about what led to the incident, and Dean’s medical and mental health history.”

Sam’s throat is suddenly very dry. “Sure,” he says. And he feels a little like he’s stabbing Dean in the back. Because talking about each other’s issues to outsiders has always been the ultimate betrayal. Again, Sam wishes he wasn’t there. He wishes he hadn’t let Eileen talk him into doing this. But a small part of him also acknowledges that Eileen didn’t make him do shit; this is Sam’s decision. Sam’s fault.

“Can you tell me about Dean’s symptoms prior to this morning’s events – did he give you any indication that he’d been planning on hurting himself?”

“He, ah,” Sam doesn’t know where to begin. He looks at Cas

helplessly. He hadn't anticipated that this would be so hard.

Cas did most of the talking in the emergency room, and Sam let him, because Cas had, after all, witnessed the so-called *incident*. So, Sam tried not to wince as Cas told the doctor how Dean had woken up in the middle of the night to find a knife, had told Cas that he wanted to die, was having trouble distinguishing between what was real and wasn't real, was apparently hearing and seeing things that didn't exist, and now had stopped responding to anything whatsoever.

And it all felt too close. It kept sending Sam back to that fucking psych ward, with Lucifer clapping cymbals right next to Sam's ear.

"Dean's been depressed for some time," Cas begins, voice amazingly level. "He has previously experienced episodes of depression. Sam and I assumed it would pass as it's done before."

Dr. Jorgensen nods and starts taking notes on his stupid clipboard. Sam doesn't understand quite why he dislikes the man so much; he's been outwardly polite and professional thus far. But Sam can't help the panicky tickle in the back of his head that warns him to check the man with holy water and silver.

"What did this particular depressive episode involve? Any altered sleeping or eating habits?"

"He stopped eating," Cas answers. "We've been trying to make him eat. And he doesn't sleep. He has nightmares. He's also been having frequent panic attacks."

"And has he received any treatment for those previous depressive episodes?" Dr. Jorgensen prompts them.

"No," Sam says. "It's never been this bad before. And he – he doesn't do doctors."

Dr. Jorgensen shares an understanding smile. "So, he doesn't currently have any diagnoses, and he isn't taking any medication?"

"No," Sam confirms. "Or – well – he has a prescription for valium. But that's because he, um, detoxed a couple days ago."

"Detoxed from…?"

"Alcohol," Sam says. And fuck this. "He – we didn't know it was going to be so bad."

“And how long has your brother been an alcoholic?” Dr. Jorgensen asks.

Sam exchanges another look with Cas, but for once Cas doesn’t come to Sam’s rescue. Sam taps his fingers against his legs. He suddenly can’t get comfortable on his chair, and he knows Dr. Jorgensen probably doesn’t mean to be laying on the guilt trip, but Sam can’t help but feel like suddenly everything wrong with Dean is completely Sam’s responsibility.

“Maybe ten years,” Sam says. “But he’s gone…back and forth. It only got bad…I don’t know. It’s been bad for a while, I guess, but it’s never been an issue, really,” he finishes, feeling defeated.

“And is there a family history of alcoholism or other substance abuse?” Dr. Jorgensen plies.

Sam drops his head. It’s easier to talk to his bouncing knee. “Our Dad. Yeah. He was…while we were kids, he’d drink all the time.” Isn’t this supposed to be about Dean? Why did they have to drag Dad into this? Why did they have to drag Sam? “And, ah, me…drugs. More than ten years ago, now. Dean helped me get through it.”

“Alright,” Dr. Jorgensen keeps scratching at his clipboard. “Maybe this is a good time to talk a little about your family. You mentioned your father in the past tense…has he passed away?”

“Yeah,” Sam keeps jogging his knee. He can feel Cas looking at him. Selfishly, Sam wishes the doctor would ask more questions Cas could answer. “Heart attack,” Sam says quickly, knowing that Dr. Jorgensen is probably astute at catching people in lies. Sam needs to pull himself the fuck together and stop hesitating if he wants any of this to sound convincing. “Fourteen years ago, the three of us were in a car accident. A semi t-boned us. Dean was pretty banged up. Dad, too. But the both of them pulled through except Dad – the stress, I guess. It was…” Sam doesn’t know how to stop talking. “It was unexpected.”

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Jorgensen says. “That must have been difficult. Was your mother around?”

“No,” Sam swallows. “She died in a housefire when I was a baby. Dean was four. He, ah, carried me out.” And Sam has no fucking clue how to explain that Mom died again less than a year ago, and he hopes he isn’t put in a place where he’ll have to. He has to be careful about coming up with too many lies. So far, he’s kept to safe ones – ones Dean will hopefully know because they’ve mutually agreed on

them whenever cover stories are needed, but it could get sticky if the doctor pries much deeper.

“So, your father raised the two of you on his own?” Dr. Jorgensen says.

“Yeah,” Sam runs his tongue over his teeth. He wants out of this office. He keeps having to remind himself that they’re talking about Dean. This is for Dean. The doctor isn’t here for Sam.

“Can you tell me a little about Dean’s upbringing?”

“We – we moved around a lot,” Sam says. “Dad was a traveling salesman. I don’t think we ever spent a year in one school. We weren’t really able to put down roots.”

“That’s very difficult,” Dr. Jorgensen says. “Did the both of you finish school?”

“No, Dean dropped out when he was seventeen to, ah, work for our dad. He got his GED a couple years later. I, um, started college but left – my, um, girlfriend died,” and shit. Shit. Because this isn’t supposed to be about Sam.

“I’m very sorry.”

Sam manages a nod.

“Is there a family history of mental health issues?”

Sam’s stomach twists. He has no idea how to delicately say that, yes, once Sam went so far off his rocker, he became best friends with Lucifer. Instead he rattles off the list of diagnoses he got in the psych ward.

“Um, yeah. Me. I – eight years ago I spent some time in a facility. For, ah, schizoaffective disorder with, ah, religious psychosis. But that was a misdiagnosis. It was just, ah, PTSD. I’m, ah, better now.”

“Can I ask – you’ve mentioned your own PTSD, the fire your mother died in, a car crash, and your girlfriend’s death – has your family or Dean experience any other major traumas?”

Sam nearly laughs. He can feel the hysteria building, and he fights to keep ahold of himself. “There’s been a…a lot. Dean’s lived a rough life. We both have. He’s been involved in some…stuff.”

“Any legal troubles?”

This time Sam does laugh, but he catches it quick, hopes he plays it off as a cough, but Dr. Jorgensen gives him a strange look.

“No,” Sam says. “Just – like normal stuff.”

“Mm-hm,” Dr. Jorgensen says. And fuck. Fuck. Because this is a bad idea. Such a fucking bad idea. Dr. Jorgensen won’t find anything if he goes digging under Dean Campbell, but Sam will never be fully comfortable with the rap sheet the two of them managed to accumulate, no matter how many times they’ve legally died.

“I know this must be hard to talk about, Sam. And, I’m sorry, but I have to ask. To your knowledge, does Dean have any history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse? Including childhood neglect.”

“No,” Sam says at once. And maybe Sam’s just too used to lying to physicians; it’s become a knee-jerk reaction by now.

“Sam…” Cas says, so softly Sam almost doesn’t hear him.

Sam shuts his eyes. And, shit, because the decision is made now, whether Sam likes it or not. Dean’s there. And he’s staying.

“Dad used to leave us alone all the time,” Sam says, all in a rush, like maybe it won’t hurt so badly saying it quickly. Because this isn’t something he’s ever told anyone. Certainly, never something he’s talked about with Dean.

“Shit. He’d leave us for days. Weeks sometimes. I was just a kid. *Dean* was just a kid, and he practically raised me. He’d go hungry for me when Dad didn’t leave us enough money. And when Dad’d get drunk, he’d yell at us all the time.”

Dr. Jorgensen’s eyes are soft. Understanding. Sam hates it. “Did your father ever physically hurt you or Dean?”

Sam’s already shaking his head. He feels like he’s going to throw up. He doesn’t know when he started trembling. Because he doesn’t know. He doesn’t fucking know.

“He might have,” Sam whispers. “He – one time I thought I saw him hit him. Dean was a teenager. He snuck out when we were in New York. I thought he just stumbled ‘cause he was high, but Dad might have hit him.”

“Is there anything else?” Dr. Jorgensen prompts.

Fuck. Because Sam’s not stupid. It might have taken him too long to figure out, maybe because a part of him never wanted to know, but he isn’t stupid. And Sam remembers how Dean used to sneak out at night when Dad wasn’t around, how he’d somehow always come back in the morning with enough money for rent and food or a new winter coat for Sam.

And for a long time, Sam just assumed it was from hustling pool or poker, maybe in some of his darker moments he thought Dean was stealing, but when they were stuck in small towns, it would have been impossible to hit a bar more than once, before Dean got thrown out on his ass or someone figured out he was carrying a fake license.

So, Sam’s not stupid. He’s been around enough truck stops and barrooms to know how things work. He watched how Dean transformed himself from a vulnerable kid with a pretty boy face into a defensive and prickly guy with a leather jacket, bravado carefully studied and snapped into effect for protection. How Dean still doesn’t like to get undressed when Sam’s in the room, doesn’t like people touching his clothes – and that’s weird because they’ve lived in such close quarters their entire lives that excessive privacy is notable.

But it’s not something Sam thinks he can talk about. Certainly not with Dean. Because Sam’s never talked about that kind of stuff with anyone. He almost did once, with Rowena, almost told her how Lucifer would come to him dressed in Jess’s body. How Sam can’t think about her anymore without also thinking about the devil.

So, Sam can’t talk about it with Dean, because talking about it means thinking about it. And Sam doesn’t want to think about it.

“Sam,” Dr. Jorgensen says kindly. “I can tell this conversation is upsetting you. Would you like to stop? We can continue another time.”

The idea of stopping now is agonizing, so Sam shakes his head again. “No. I just – I wanna get it over with.”

Cas’s hand claps against Sam’s knee, squeezes softly.

“Alright, Sam,” Dr. Jorgensen allows. “Perhaps I’ll ask Castiel a few things now. You can take a break.”

Sam nods, feeling stupid. This is about Dean. This is supposed to be

about Dean.

Cas perks up slightly in his chair when Dr. Jorgensen turns to him. "Can you tell me how Dean typically responds to stress – any coping mechanisms he uses?"

"He would use alcohol," Cas answers unflinchingly. "But now that he's stopped drinking, he's begun to hurt himself. He's done this before, I believe, several years ago."

"Self-harm, unfortunately, isn't uncommon," Dr. Jorgensen says. "And how does Dean act in interpersonal relationships? How long have you two been partners?"

"Ah…we were friends for a long time before…" Cas flounders. He looks at Sam. "We have lived together for nearly three years now."

"Would you describe your relationship as healthy?" Dr. Jorgensen says.

Cas's face is flushed. He looks uncomfortable. "It can be…difficult to navigate sometimes. But Dean remains my best friend. I value him immensely."

"And Dean is a homosexual?"

"He – no," Cas says. He blushes again. "No. He has sexual relations with both men and women. But he doesn't like labels. It makes him uncomfortable."

"Did your family support Dean's sexuality?" Dr. Jorgensen turns to Sam again.

"We didn't know," Sam says stupidly. "Until Cas. But – I mean," Sam adds quickly. "I do. I support Dean."

Cas squeezes Sam's knee again. This time it might be out of gratitude rather than comfort.

"Does he have any children?"

"No," Sam says at once. *Yes*, a small part of him reminds him, *he did*. But Sam killed her.

"And does Dean have a history of suicide attempts of suicidal ideation? Has he ever mentioned to either of you a desire to die or take his own life? Or have you ever found any evidence – a note,

perhaps, or…."

Sam and Cas exchange looks.

"Yes," Cas says finally. "He's mentioned it to both of us on multiple occasions."

"And he tried before," Sam says, throat taught. "About a week ago. He downed some whiskey and pain meds. He – that's why we made him give up alcohol."

"Are there any other clinicians who cared for Dean available to comment?" Dr. Jorgensen says. "It would be helpful to compare notes."

"You can probably get in touch with Dr. Meade from Community Memorial in Marysville," Sam says. "She treated the overdose. But she, uh, we told her it was an accident. We weren't sure."

"Thank you for telling me this, both of you," Dr. Jorgensen says after making a final note. "This has been very helpful."

"So, um," Sam fidgets again. He doesn't know what he's supposed to say. "Do you know what might be wrong with him?" he finishes weakly.

"It's impossible for me to formally diagnose Dean without conducting a more complete psychiatric evaluation," Dr. Jorgensen explains. "Unfortunately, I won't be able to do so until he becomes more responsive."

"But you will be able to help him?" Cas says, leaning forward slightly.

"No one is ever beyond help," Dr. Jorgensen says. "It may take some time, but with yours and Dean's full cooperation, I'm confident we'll be able to find an effective treatment plan."

"Okay," Sam says on an exhale. Dr. Jorgensen stands. Sam and Cas follow suit.

Dr. Jorgensen extends his hand to each of them in turn. "We'll keep you informed about Dean's condition. And I urge you to visit later today during visiting hours. Support of friends and family is integral to our patients' recovery."

"Of course, doctor," Cas says with a solemn nod. "We'll be here."

OOO

Three months ago

If Sam's been possessed by Chuck, then that means Chuck's original plan is probably still in effect. Which means Dean needs to make sure everyone they know needs to stay out of Chuck's way. Dean doesn't understand why Chuck didn't simply kill Eileen – or Dean, for that matter, before leaving the bunker. But maybe that's all part of Chuck's masterplan too, that he needs to find some other way to guarantee the Winchester brother gladiator fest goes down.

Or maybe Sam's still in there, Dean thinks, and then berates himself, because of course Sam's still fucking in there. He has to be.

And where the fuck is Cas? Why the fuck isn't he here? Why the fuck did he leave Dean again – again when doesn't he fucking know by now that Dean needs him – when Dean can't fucking function without –

And

"What will we do when we get there?" Eileen says from the driver's side. For the first time in a long time, Dean doesn't trust himself to drive. He hasn't been able to stop shaking.

She shoots him a concerned look when Dean doesn't answer. With the whole she-can't-hear and Dean-barely-speaking, they aren't doing a super great job at communicating.

"I don't know," Dean says at last; Eileen looks at him again so she can read his lips. "Just – try to talk him out of whatever he's trying. Chuck might not be totally in the driver's seat right now."

"What if it's a trap?" Eileen insists, like she had when their tracking spell back on the map table reacted so quickly, centering on the outskirts of Dubois, Wyoming, about eleven and a half hours away.

"Just drive," Dean says, and swallows, because his throat hurts, and he keeps losing track of his thoughts, and he needs to fucking concentrate. "We'll figure it out when we find him."

They'll have to.

Chapter End Notes

Content warning (spoilers): Sam contemplates the possibility that Dean might have prostituted himself in order to provide for Sam; this triggers thoughts of Sam's own sexual trauma with Lucifer in the Cage. Also, there's conversation about child abuse, suicidality, and self-harm behaviors.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Uhg. Life. Amiright?

See end note for spoilery content warnings (all story tags apply).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three months before

Chuck feels the Nephilim as soon as he lands. He cannot quite sense the location, but he knows it's West. Never mind.

He crosses Sam Winchester's long legs and leans back against the comfortable sofa. He looks at the identical piles of ash on the floor that were once Jack and Helen Kline.

The boy will come to him.

OOO

Present day

Sam and Cas aren't allowed to see Dean again for another six hours. There's nothing else to do but go back to the bunker. Sam is a bundle of nervous energy, fidgeting and muttering and constantly asking Cas whether it's a good idea that they left Dean at the hospital, that maybe they should just break him out now before something happens.

But Cas feels incredibly, eerily calm. It's like a sickness that's seeped into his bones. All he feels is heavy and still. There's something squeezing his heart. Painful and unrelenting, and Cas realizes he misses Dean.

He misses his smile. His laughter. The easy way he throws good-natured insults at his brother. How he cooks breakfast in the morning, bakes muffins, keeps a steady supply of coffee in the kitchen.

The bunker is subdued. Jack and Eileen both want to be filled in, and Cas lets Sam take over, because Sam needs something to do.

Cas retreats to his room, but the air is stale and cold. Unfamiliar. Instead, Cas finds himself migrating toward Dean's room. Dean's room

is messy. It still smells like cheap takeout wrappers and old alcohol, but at least it smells familiar.

Castiel notices that Dean's covers are uncharacteristically untidy, because no one thought to straighten things out in the chaos of the previous night. Cas makes sure to make the bed before he sits down, tugging tight hospital folds at the corners, just like Dean likes.

Then Cas perches himself on the edge of Dean's bed and pulls out his phone. He finds the internet browser and taps into the search bar: "catatonia." *A state of psycho-motor immobility and behavioral abnormality manifested by stupor.*

He looks up "psychotic episode." *Symptoms include delusions, hallucinations, talking incoherently, and agitation.*

"psychological trauma." *damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a distressing event. Often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope, or integrate the emotions involved with that experience.*

"physical, emotional, and sexual abuse."

"childhood trauma."

"ptsd."

"cptsd."

"how to help someone with ptsd." *When someone you care about suffers from PTSD, it can leave you feeling overwhelmed. But with these strategies, you can help your loved one move on with their life.*

Cas saves the website with a list of strategies for helping a loved one with PTSD on his notepad app so he can read it over in more detail later.

He searches "depressive episode."

"clinical depression."

"manic depression."

"how to manage depression." *Exercise, balanced diet, healthy sleeping habits, sunlight.*

Cas realizes that there isn't any sunlight in the bunker. Cas searches

“what to do if there are no windows.”

He searches “sunlamp.”

Sam comes in to remind Cas he should eat lunch. Sam doesn’t look surprised to see Cas in Dean’s room. Cas goes to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich, head buried in his phone.

Cas searches “housing listings lebanon ks.”

“how to make money for a down payment.”

At quarter-after three, Sam comes back into Dean’s room to tell Cas that they should go back to the hospital. Cas looks up from his phone. There is a white rectangle tattooed across his vision, and he blinks several times before his eyesight clears. He nods at Sam in the doorway, tucks his phone away, and follows Sam back out of the bunker.

Eileen and Jack stay behind; Sam decided it was best if they didn’t overwhelm Dean with too many visitors.

It’s a silent drive back to the hospital. The waiting room is fuller in the psych unit now, with other anxious friends and relatives waiting to be let into the ward for the visiting hour. Sam’s knee jitters unceasingly, and he’s chewing on his nails. He looks tired and unkempt. Cas realizes that, although Sam had reminded Cas to eat lunch, Cas had neglected to remind Sam to do the same.

Dean, when they see him, is quiet. He’s drowsy and unresponsive with the medication. And his eyes blearily track Cas and Sam when they sit down next to him. He’s wearing white and blue hospital pajamas. He looks unwell; his beard is already starting to come in again, and his eyes are red.

Cas thinks it looks like he’s been crying, and it makes Cas’s chest hurt. It makes him agree with Sam: maybe they did make a mistake bringing Dean here.

Sam gets filled in by Dean’s attending nurse – they have him on twenty-four-hour watch because he’s a suicide risk. Dean’s improved. He’s more aware of what’s going on around him than he was when they brought him in. He’s still not speaking, but he’s eating on his own. He hasn’t reacted violently. He hasn’t hurt anyone or himself.

“Hey, man,” Sam says hoarsely. He puts a palm to the back of Dean’s

neck and draws their faces together until their foreheads touch. "You're gonna get out of here soon, okay? They'll figure out meds or whatever and then we'll get you out of here."

Cas looks at how close Sam is to Dean, how large and looming he is, and remembers what the PTSD website said about not crowding people, about not touching people unless they wanted to be touched. But Dean doesn't seem bothered by his brother's proximity. He blinks at Sam's face, nods tiredly, and Cas thinks that must mean Dean can hear and understand. At least, Cas hopes so.

OOO

Cas and Sammy are there, but then they're not, and Dean wonders if he just imagined them being there in the first place.

He wishes his head would stop doing that. Everything's so unstable and confusing. There are too many people and then not enough people. Just four bare walls. Hours and hours and days and days and Billie? *Billie, you bitch, are you listening?*

And he manages to unwind a screw from the metal bedpost. Tick marks scratched onto the wall. Scratched onto his arms. One day, two days, three, four, five. Lost count. Lost count. Lost fucking count and he can't hear his brother through the solid concrete wall.

Gonna be there forever. Drowning. Suffocating forever in the tiny metal box at the bottom of the ocean. Grave dirt in his throat. Too tight.

Not real not real not real NOT REAL

"Shut up!" Dean roars to no one.

His fist goes through the wall, and he can't remember standing, can't remember making the decision to throw a punch, but his fist cracks straight through the drywall. He doesn't register any pain in his hand, just a cold numbness. He digs his fist back out, hits the wall again, two punches in quick succession. He hears two cracks: something from his fingers and something in the plaster.

He hits the wall again. Something pops in his wrist. There's blood on the paint and blood on his hand. He still can't fucking feel anything and that's because it's *not real not real not fucking real.*

There are bodies and voices in the room, hands on Dean's shoulders

and he's wrestled back onto the bed. His hand connects with flesh and someone yelps *shit* in pain. They're strapping him down, and Dean's fairly certain he's yelling, then whimpering like some pathetic child to not chain him up because he hates being chained up and *please, Sammy, please help*

please Alastair no please I'll do anything

The IV needle slips back into the crook of his elbow, glides cold, blessed relief into his veins, and everything goes black.

OOO

Dean wakes gradually, tortuously. His right arm's in a cast up to his elbow. He can't tell how much time has passed. There aren't any clocks on the wall; there's nothing on the wall: no television, no mirror, nothing he could shatter and use to hurt himself with. There aren't even the holes in the plaster anymore; they must have moved him to another room, in case the damage would fucking *upset* him or something.

Someone clears their throat at Dean's side and Dean's head whips to the side; a bad idea. The room immediately spins. His head feels muzzy, like it's stuffed with cotton. He blinks his eyes to clear his vision, which blurs and warps unnervingly.

"How're you feeling, Dean?" It's the doctor – Doctor – Doctor Yellow-Beard with the fake smiles and stern eyes.

"Like shit," Dean groans.

The doctor cracks a smile. "Glad to see your sense of humor is back. Can you give me a little more detail?"

The doctor has a damn clipboard on his lap.

"Dizzy," Dean says through his clenched teeth. He's not giving this bozo fuck-all.

"That will be the meds," the doctor says patiently.

"How long have I been out?" Dean asks. He wants to get his bearing. It's impossible to focus on anything; the room is still spinning. It's making him nauseas.

He can't move his head. He can't move his arms or legs.

Can't –

He's tied –

He's tied to the –

Fucking bed.

Dean tries to remind himself to breathe. His chest constricts. His throat feels dry.

"Quite a while," the doctor starts to say.

"How many fucking days?" Dean cuts him off. He doesn't sound as calm as he should. He knows he should sound level-headed, if he wants them to undo the restraints. But he doesn't have time to deal with bullshit.

Because he's tied to the fucking bed –

Tied –

The doctor raises an eyebrow, scratches something on his damn clipboard, but answers calmly, "About thirty hours."

Dean swears again on an exhale. He tries to sit up, but the restraints pull. There's one across his fucking chest, too – and – Alastair raises the razor and – *no one will ever know you like I will, Deano. No one will ever feel you like me.*

"Dean," says the doctor, pressing a hand to Dean's chest.

"Get off," Dean growls. He can't stop trying to move, and the strain makes blood thud in his ears. His vision clouds. Don't fight the restraints, he tells himself. Don't fight it. It just makes it worse. If he stops fighting. Stops struggling. Just relaxes. Maybe it won't hurt so badly, and –

I own you. Before I'm done with you, I wanna hear you beg.

"Dean, I need you to calm down if you want me to undo the restraints," the doctor warns in a painfully measured tone, like Dean's too stupid to understand him. The doctor doesn't move his damn hand. "We can't release you until we're sure you're not at risk of hurting yourself or anyone else. We're here to help you."

Don't move. She says. *Don't make a sound.* She grins down at him. And

she's pretty for a teacher. Young. Sexy. *I'm just trying to help.*

And what the fuck? Why is Dean thinking about that now? What the fuck does that have to do with anything?

"Dean," the doctor says gently.

"Bullshit," Dean hisses, because he knows a threat when he hears one, and people who are trying to help don't use threats. "Don't fucking touch me."

"Okay, Dean." The doctor takes his hand off Dean's chest. It doesn't make it easier to breathe – but it should – it was supposed to make it go away – and Dean – Dean

There's no possible way for Dean to know if this man is telling the truth, Dean suddenly realizes, and the knowledge is like a punch to his gut.

Dean has no way of knowing whether he's really crazy or if this is some kind of weird-ass spell or hex, if they've got him on drugs to make everything trippy or it's some kind of venom. How can he even be sure that this doctor guy is real and not just Dean's imagination like Dr. Cartwright had been back at the mental hospital with Sammy?

"Breathe," the doctor instructs him, but he doesn't touch Dean again.

"Fuck off," Dean spits, barely able to get the words up his throat.

"Breathe," the doctor tells him again, and this time it's an order, so Dean reacts to him on reflex, like he used to respond to Dad, and he tries to breathe, takes an abortive, stuttering breath that doesn't fill his lungs, but that's all he can manage because there's something on his chest, and it's suffocating him.

"Again, Dean," the doctor says calmly.

So, Dean shuts his eyes and tries again. He sucks in a shuddering breath that ends in a gasp, takes another breath that doesn't hurt his chest as badly, keeps his eyes closed until he's breathing normally again and the doctor's voice filters back in.

"That's good, Dean. Very good."

Like Dean's a fucking toddler who just learned how to tie his shoes or some shit. Except Dean doesn't remember when he learned to tie his

shoes. He remembers learning how to shoot a rifle; Dad's hands heavy and steady on his shoulders, guiding his small body around the impossibly long, unwieldy weapon. But he doesn't remember when he learned to tie his shoes.

Maybe he learned before the fire. Maybe Mom taught him.

"I'm going to teach you the 5-4-3-2-1 method," the doctor says. "It's a grounding technique. It can help you get through a panic attack, alright?"

"Fucking fantastic," Dean drawls.

The doctor doesn't raise to the bait, and Dean figures the guy is well-practiced in dealing with crazy people, so he probably has a shit load of patience.

"I'd like for you to list five things you can hear, four things you see, three things you can touch, then two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. You don't have to tell me, just take a moment and do it in your head."

The doctor goes silent, and Dean figures that's his cue. And maybe if he's a good boy, they'll give him a lollypop or let him sit up on his own, so, for now, he'll play their stupid games. He can hear the small noises of the doctor sitting next to Dean's bed: whisper of fabric as he crosses his legs, rustling paper of his notes on the notepad. Dean can hear his own blood pumping in his ears, a constant rush that's still too fast. He can hear someone walking down the hallway, passed the closed door to Dean's room. Somewhere down the hall, someone coughs.

He can't see anything right now, because his eyes are closed, and if they were open, he'd just see the doctor frowning at him, so Dean figures he can skip that one.

And he can touch the bedsheets under his palm. If he curls the thumb of his right hand in, he can feel the plaster cast that engulfs part of his hand. He probably broke his wrist, maybe a couple fingers, because his middle and ring finger are splinted together. He can feel the padded strap across his chest, tight enough not to let him sit up but not tight enough that it hurts.

And then Dean forgets what else he's supposed to be thinking about. Because there's a leather strap against his bare chest and blood running down his forehead and between his thighs. Two things he can

smell: he can smell sulfur and brimstone. One thing he can taste: he can taste ash.

Blood in his throat.

“I’m going to undo your restraints now, Dean,” the doctor cuts into Dean’s thoughts. Dean’s eyes snap open. It’s just the doctor, not Alastair, looming over him. “Is it alright if I touch you?”

Dean gives a single, sharp nod because his throat is too tight to talk.

The doctor reaches over to unbuckle the cuffs around Dean’s wrists, and Dean barely stops himself from flinching away. Then he undoes the strap around Dean’s chest. He gets up from his chair to go to the foot of Dean’s bed, unfastening the bands around Dean’s ankles.

The relief at being released is so intense that, for a moment, Dean can’t breathe again. He shuts his eyes, tries to fight the impulse to curl into a ball, not wanting to look any more like a little kid than he already feels, but ultimately can’t stop himself from crossing his arms over his stomach. His hand finds the cast again.

The doctor must notice Dean’s confusion, because he fills in the details, “You broke two fingers and fractured your wrist. You also broke the nose of one of the orderlies. James.”

Guilt stirs in Dean’s gut. “Oh,” he says, because he can’t really remember freaking out – it’s just a lot of fuzzy panic and pain – but he wishes he hadn’t hurt anyone. “Sorry.”

“He’ll be alright,” the doctor says with a soft smile. “And you didn’t know what you were doing. You were frightened, and you reacted to protect yourself. You have impressive reflexes, to fight back as hard as you did when you were already sedated.”

Maybe it’s an invitation to elaborate on his tragic backstory or some shit, but Dean doesn’t take it.

“Do you need anything?” the doctor asks. “Would you like a glass of water?”

Dean shakes his head. And he doesn’t like lying on his back, all vulnerable, in front of a stranger, so he pushes himself onto his elbows. The doctor leans over to press the button that makes the hospital bed rise, so Dean can sit back against it. By the time he’s sitting up, his vision is blurry again, but Dean breathes through the

rush of dizziness.

“My name is Dr. Jorgensen,” the doctor says after a moment where he waits for Dean to get comfortable. “We’ve met before. Do you remember?”

Dean nods. He vaguely remembers the waiting room. Sam and Cas leaving him. And he tries not to be angry that Sam and Cas just left him there, just let the nurse wheel him away.

“Can I ask you, when you don’t speak, is that a choice or is it involuntary?”

Dean looks up before he can stop himself. He doesn’t know what to say, because, yeah, he’s thought about it before, and sometimes he just can’t help it, the not-speaking thing, but sometimes he’s just being a dick, but he wasn’t expecting the doctor to actually be interested.

Dean clears his throat one, twice, swallows and finally works up enough breath to say, “Both. Sometimes.”

Dr. Jorgensen nods, writes something on his clipboard, and asks, “Does it happen often? Being unable to speak?”

Dean shrugs. “Not really.”

“Is it alright if I ask you a few questions now?” Dr. Jorgensen says. “Just some general information about your background and how you’re feeling?”

“When can I get out of here?” Dean asks.

“You’re here on a seventy-two-hour hold,” Dr. Jorgensen replies. “It is possible, however, that we extend it to fourteen days, if we don’t think you’re stable enough to release by the day after tomorrow.”

Something hot and poisonous pulses in Dean’s belly, a mixture of anger and fear that he can’t quite parse out. And he knows he’s being threatened again. Warned to behave or they won’t let him go. Won’t let him go, and day after fucking day, he’ll make tally marks on the walls.

“You’re here for help, Dean,” Dr. Jorgensen reminds him. “Trust me when I say that we want to be able to send you home as soon as possible.”

There's silence for a moment until the doctor figures out Dean's not going to say anything.

"I've already spoken to Castiel and your brother Sam," Dr. Jorgensen prompts gently. "Perhaps you can help by filling in some details."

So not only did Sam and Cas decide to just dump Dean there, they decided to fill the doctor in, too. Fucking great. Fantastic. Now Dean needs to figure out what they told him, because Dean needs to know how psycho the doc thinks he is.

"You live with your partner Castiel and his son, correct?" Dr. Jorgensen says.

Partner. The word takes a long time to slink through Dean's thick-feeling head. Fucking partner. And he barely stops the surprise from showing on his face, because, sure, yeah, duh, of course Cas needed a cover story, so the hospital would tell him anything. But fucking partner.

Partner – like Dean and Cas are some kind of –

"Yeah," Dean says when he realizes the doctor's been waiting for a reply for too long. "Yeah. That's correct."

"And Castiel found you," the doctor continues. "In the kitchen with a knife. Did you intend to kill yourself?"

Dean doesn't remember what he intended. All he remembers is wanting everything to stop. The voices. The memories. The cold, tight grip of panic on his heart. He just wanted it all to go away. And a knife just felt like a good idea. And he couldn't stop thinking about the veins in his arm, how most people cut too close to the wrist, severing the radial or ulnar artery, but people who meant business aimed higher, above the elbow, for the brachial.

"Can you tell me why you wanted to hurt yourself, Dean?" the doctor says calmly.

Dean looks at his hands, both in his lap, one in a cast. The other is thin. Skeletal. And Dean has been a corpse before. He decomposed in the ground for four months while his soul screamed in Hell. Sammy should have burned him. Should have burned him, because then maybe he wouldn't have been able to come back.

"Can you tell me if you hear voices, see things that aren't there? Do

you have trouble telling the difference between what's real and what's not real?"

Dean's struck by the sudden, wild urge to confess everything to this douche: ghosts, monsters, demons, and, oh yeah, that *partner* of Dean's? He's an ex-angel. Really give 'um something to talk about. 100%, grass-fed, free range lunatic.

But Dean swallows the impulse.

"Are you not talking now because you don't want to or because you can't?" Dr. Jorgensen says. "You can raise one finger if it's because you don't want to, two if it's involuntary."

Without hesitating, Dean flips up the middle finger of his left hand, shows it to the doctor. Dr. Jorgensen actually chuckles. He shakes his head.

"I walked into that one, didn't I?" he says wryly.

There's another pause. Dean wonders how long this is supposed to last. If it's a one-hour kinda deal or if it's an all limits off torture session.

"Castiel and Sam explained that you're a recovering alcoholic?" Dr. Jorgensen says, and it's not a question, even if his voice goes up at the end with a lilt of a question mark.

Because of fucking course they did.

"And Sam explained that your father was also an alcoholic?"

"He wasn't," Dean grinds out between his teeth.

The doctor's expression is unreadable. "Your brother mentioned your father frequently drank, but you don't think he had an alcohol problem?"

Yeah, well, Sam can go fuck himself.

"Dean," Dr. Jorgensen says slowly. "I know you've experienced multiple traumas in your life, including the deaths of your parents. Your brother didn't provide much detail beyond that. But, as near as I can tell, you're suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder, which, until recently, you treated primarily with alcohol. Without that crutch, now, however, you're left vulnerable to your trauma, and you

don't know how to healthily cope with it. It's overwhelming you."

Dean tilts his head away from the doctor, stares at the wall instead, and he puts his hand to his head, presses into his temples, because his head hurts. He doesn't remember when it started hurting; it just does. Maybe it just always hurts now. It'd make sense, all the traumatic brain injuries he's taken over the years. 'Bout time some lasting damage made itself known.

Dean hears Dr. Jorgensen shift in his seat, bracing his elbows on his knees and leaning forward, probably doubling-up on that stupid earnest expression. "It doesn't have to be like this, Dean. I know things probably don't seem like they can better, but tehy can. There are multiple treatments you can try. Medication and therapy."

The doctor doesn't know shit about things getting better. Because every single fucking time it seems like maybe things can get better, it just gets worse. Worse than Dean can possibly imagine. And it's been so many years. Dr. Jorgensen has no idea how many horrible years – Dean's whole life and his whole forty years of death in Hell. And it doesn't get better.

Dean isn't someone who gets *better*. He doesn't deserve that.

"We've started you on Zoloft for your depression," Dr. Jorgensen says. If he's exasperated by Dean's continued silence, he doesn't show it. "It's had promising results in PTSD patients. We also have you on Abilify. It's an antipsychotic. It will help with any future delusions and psychosis. The medication won't be fully effective for four to six weeks, and you'll have to be closely monitored during that time in case we need to adjust your dosages."

There's a whole hell of a lot to digest, and Dean didn't understand one-fucking-syllable of it. Certain words leap out at him like they've been stained highlighter yellow in his mind. He's not depressed like some wackjob bleeding heart and he's not some fucking psycho-killer like Ted Bundy, so he's not sure why he needs *antipsychotics*.

"Fuck that," he says to the doctor, because the guy's stopped talking, and it's clear he still wants Dean to say something.

"Dean," Dr. Jorgensen says soberly, and he sounds stern now, which means Dean's finally succeeded in pissing him off. "You have every chance here. You have a supportive brother and partner and access to psychiatric care, but you won't get better if you don't want to get better. The only way any of this is going to work is if you put some

effort into it."

Great, so now the fact that Dean's so screwed up is all his fault? Because he can't put in enough effort or something. And doesn't this douchewad understand that it takes all of Dean's effort just to keep his fucking head above water? That it feels like he's fucking drowning, and he's so sick of treading water that, yeah, fuck effort, just sucking in a lungful of water is the easiest and quickest way out, and why does the easiest way out have to be wrong? Why the fuck can't Dean just give up? Why's everyone so fucking attached to the idea of keeping Dean around?

Dean takes a deep breath, but he doesn't realize how tight his chest is until the air in his lungs stutters up his throat. And he feels too much like he's going to start crying. So, he keeps staring at the wall, not at the doctor, fists his left hand so hard he makes his knuckles hurt, and he swallows air, one gulp after another. Because crying in front of Cas or Sammy is one thing, but he's not going to start sobbing in front of a fucking stranger, much less one who has the keys to a padded cell and a straitjacket.

"We still have fifteen minutes," Dr. Jorgensen says kindly, and Dean knows he hasn't fooled him at all with the whole hiding his face act. "Would you like to talk about something, or would you like to just sit here?"

And he says it like it would actually be totally okay if Dean just wanted to sit there. That the doctor will just keep watching him quietly until the fifteen minutes are up and Dean's allowed to be alone again. Or, at least, Dr. Jorgensen swaps out for another nurse, the one that's been sticking to the corner of Dean's room the whole time to make sure Dean doesn't tie his sheets to the bedpost and loop them around his neck.

The problem with being raised a hunter is that Dean knows all the ways a human being can die.

"It – it doesn't matter," Dean says.

"What doesn't matter?" Dr. Jorgensen says.

Dean breaths in through his mouth, out through his nose, like Lisa taught him. Fucking Lisa. And Ben. Dean's never told anyone – not Sammy or Cas or Mom – but he lurked around on Facebook for a while, found the kid, saw he was a junior at the University of Michigan. Typical fraternity bro posts. Beer and girls. Same goofy

grin. Kid shared too much online.

And Ben looked even more like Dean as he got older. *I was just gonna tell him you're his real daddy.* There's no way Dean will ever know whether the demon was telling the truth or lying. And part of Dean is glad he'll never know. It's easier to think that he's not leaving anything behind. Kid deserves more than that.

"None of this," Dean says, tossing his hand to indicate the hospital room, the doctor, the psychiatric ward. The whole damn world. None of it mattered. "It doesn't fucking – it doesn't get *better*."

"I won't try to argue with you," Dr. Jorgensen says. "I understand that's what feels real to you right now –"

"No," Dean interrupts. "Fucking no." There's something screaming in the back of his head. The words taste like acid in his mouth but he can't stop them. "This isn't about how I *feel*. It's just cold hard fact. Nothing gets better. It's – no matter how Goddamn hard I try, there's always something else."

"I'm sorry," Dr. Jorgensen says. "It sounds like you've led a difficult life."

Dean snorts. "Difficult. Fuck difficult." Dean chokes. "Do you know what a person smells like when they burn?" he says it without meaning to. It just slips out of his lips, and then it hangs there in the open air.

He's talking again before he registers it. "I smelled my mom while she caught fire. I carried my baby brother to safety. Ordinarily, I wasn't even supposed to carry him down the Goddamn stairs. And then Sammy fucking left. Time and time again he left and I always had to clean up their fucking messes – he and Dad couldn't – for one Goddamn minute, they couldn't. And – and Dad nearly took my head off when he found out I let Sammy run off while I was – and I was out trying to make a fucking buck –" *out on my fucking knees, grinning pretty, batting my eyelashes, deepthroating dick so Sammy wouldn't starve or freeze or could buy new notebooks for school.*

"And then Dad fucking left and I – I should have just blown my brains out. I had the shotgun, safety off, locked and fucking loaded." Dean's shaking. He knows he's shaking. A full body tremor that he can't stop. He's half-way aware that Dr. Jorgensen is saying something, trying to make him calm down. "And, sure, yeah, screw it, I went to get Sammy from his fancy ass college and then I – I had to pull him out of another

burning building and the whole Goddamn time I just kept thinking this was it – this was how Mom died, but I couldn't say a Goddamn word because Sammy was falling apart at the fucking seams –"

God, he sounds so pathetic. Dad would be disgusted. *Take it like a fucking man, son. Swear if you have to, take a swing, but you don't cry.*

"And then there was that – the accident and –" *and Dad cut into him again and again and again until Dean was pleading, begging Dad, please, don't you let it kill me*. "And Dad fucking died and it – should have been me. Should have died –"

"Dean, slow down for me," Dr. Jorgensen says.

"And then there was all that – that fucked up shit with Ruby and the – the –" *fucking apocalypse*, Dean wants to tell him, but he bites his tongue until he can taste blood, because he doesn't want to get locked up for good. "And that was all my Goddamn fault because I couldn't – couldn't just keep letting him torture me and I shouldn't have said yes –"

"Who, Dean?" Dr. Jorgensen says calmly. "Who tortured you?"

Dean tips his head back, stares at the ceiling, blinking back tears. *Is it true?* He asked Cas all those years ago. *Did I break the first seal?* "I hurt so many of them. I – couldn't stop. I liked hurting them. I've always fucking liked killing things – it's so…fuck it's so quiet when I hurt things."

"Hurt who, Dean?" Dr. Jorgensen says, more urgently.

Dean gulps. His chest aches. An impossible, sharp pain right between his ribs, and Dean claps his hand to his chest, rubs his knuckles into his sternum, and this is what a heart attack feels like. Dean knows because he's had a heart attack before, in a puddle in that grungy basement, agony rippling through his every particle, tugging his muscles taught.

"And Sammy fucking d-died again," Dean says. It's harder to talk. His throat hurts. He thinks he stopped making sense a long time ago. It's harder to keep from telling the doctor things he shouldn't know about. *Fucking swan dived into the pit and went to Hell for the whole Goddamn world. Palled around with Lucifer in the cage for a year. Soul so shredded it felt like it'd been flayed alive, Cas said. Shove it back into Sammy's head and watch him flounder –*

“And the whole time I watched him lose his fucking mind I could barely hold it together because I could still hear Alastair every night but what does that compare with fucking *Lucifer*, and Sammy didn’t need my crap on top of everything else, I –”

“Your brother isn’t dead,” Dr. Jorgensen reminds him. “Your brother’s alright.”

“I just didn’t want to lose him,” Dean chokes to the ceiling. He can hear his heartbeat, relentless, pounding, banging against the door in his head and Michael’s going to splinter Dean’s skull wide open. Should’ve just dropped him in the Goddamn ocean where he wouldn’t bother anyone anymore. “I – all I ever want is him to be alright. I don’t know why he was so mad at me for shoving Zeke or Gadreel or whoever the fuck into his brain, but I couldn’t just let him walk away – and I know he wouldn’t have done it for me, but it’s my job. It’s my job to keep him safe.”

“Dean,” Dr. Jorgensen says. “I’m going to have to sedate you if you can’t calm down.”

Dean takes a moment to choke down some air. Swallows and swallows and he doesn’t understand why he can’t just drown. Michael keeps his head under water, but he doesn’t let him drown.

“I didn’t mean for Kevin to die,” Dean breathes. “I – I didn’t mean for any of them to die. Charlie or Mom or C-Cas –”

“Castiel is alive, too, Dean,” Dr. Jorgensen says gently. “You’re confused and upset. I’m going to call a nurse. She’ll reinsert an IV and you can rest for a while, alright?”

“No,” Dean moans. He throws his left arm over his eyes, turns onto his side so his back is to the doctor. His face is wet. “N-no. Please. I’m okay. I promise I’m okay.”

It feels like Alastair’s opened up Dean’s stomach, scooped out everything inside until he’s empty. It’s all just gaping and pain. There’s nothing left.

“Everything we ever did was pointless,” Dean says hopelessly, and his breath hitches. Every ounce of his concentration focuses inward on breathing. It’s so hard just to keep breathing.

“Dean, do you want to hurt yourself right now?” Dr. Jorgensen says.

“I don’t want to be here,” Dean whispers.

“Where, Dean?” Dr. Jorgensen insists.

“*Here*,” Dean gulps. “I – I want to be dead.” Billie promised. She promised he’d go to the Empty. Just blank space. Darkness.

“Thank you for telling me, Dean,” says Dr. Jorgensen. “But we aren’t going to let you hurt yourself. You’re safe here. Try to rest, alright?”

Dean squeezes his eyes shut. Dr. Jorgensen sounds so fucking sympathetic. And he isn’t going to let Dean die. Dean bites back a sob. He isn’t going to let Dean die, and that’s the whole Goddamn problem.

Chapter End Notes

> Content warning (spoilers): more self-harm in this chapter, including punching a wall and cutting with a sharp instrument. Also, there’s an intense scene at the end during which Dean talks to his psychiatrist about some of his past trauma and confesses that he wants to die.

Chapter 15

Present day

"You gotta get me out," Dean says. He's breathless and urgent. His eyes are red. His face is pale. He's shaking. He looks distraught in a way Sam's never quite seen him before. "S-Sammy, please." Dean latches onto Sam's arm with his one good hand, so tight his nails dig into Sam's skin.

"Dean," Sam tries to keep his voice level. Cas is sitting next to Sam, silent and troubled. "It's only two more nights, man. You can get through two more nights."

Dean struggles to swallow. His eyes dart from Sam to Cas. "It feels like fucking solitary in here."

Sam's stomach clenches. Dean and Sam's weeks in solitary confinement in that government facility are something neither of them talk about. It was a special kind of torture, had Sam flashing back to the Cage for months afterward. And Sam knows it wasn't any easier for Dean. He knows because it was Dean, ultimately, who made the decision to call Billie.

"Dean," Sam says slowly, throat thick. He clasps his hand over Dean's, tries to ply his fingers loose. "It's going to be alright. I promise."

"C-Cas," Dean must think Sam's a lost cause, because he turns desperate eyes to Castiel, and Cas nearly wilts under his gaze. "P-please."

Dean doesn't beg. Not in front of Sam, he doesn't, and it makes something inside Sam shrivel up and die.

"Your brother's right," Cas says woodenly, not looking at Sam, staring at Dean like he could will his Grace into existence and mojo Dean back together again merely by looking at him. "It isn't safe for you to leave yet. You need to let them help you."

It isn't really *Dean* they're talking to, Sam knows. But it's something else: a gnawing, ravenous something inside Dean's head that's chewing up the parts of Dean that make him Sam's big brother.

Sam talked to the doctor again before visiting hours. Dr. Jorgensen

calmly explained that Dean had started talking again, but he'd had a rough afternoon, and he was being closely monitored in case they needed to sedate him again.

So far, he was fine. Apart from being a sloppy, quivering mess that reminded Sam too much of the time Dean got infected by that ghost sickness and kept jumping at shadows – but that time had somehow seemed a lot funnier than it does now.

Dr. Jorgensen had explained that Dean wasn't improving how they hoped, that the hospital wouldn't be able to release him if he didn't respond better to the medication. Regardless, Dr. Jorgensen recommend he and Cas start looking into impatient treatment centers where Dean could land on his feet after two or three months.

"Y-you can't make me stay," Dean stammers. "I – I feel like I'm losing my Goddamn mind in here, Sammy. They – they already think I'm crazy because I – they don't fucking know anything about ghosts or – or demons and – and they're gonna lock me up."

"They won't, Dean," Sam says levelly. "We'd get you out if it was that serious. Right now, they just need to figure out your meds, then you can go. I promise."

"The meds won't work," Dean says desperately. "It's all – they just make it worse, Sammy. Because – I – I can fucking hear my heartbeat and – and –"

"Alright, alright," Sam says hastily. "I'll talk to your doctor about the meds. They're gonna figure it out."

"Sammy," Dean whispers.

Sam can't stand the burn of his brother's eyes, so he turns to Cas, not sure what he's asking for, just needing Cas to do something, to make it better in some tiny way.

Cas exchanges a look with Sam and leans forward. "Dean," he says carefully, eyebrows pinched.

Dean looks at Cas. He releases Sam and scrabbles for Cas, instead. Cas meets him half-way, catching his hand in his own.

"Please," Dean says. "I just wanna go home." He gulps. He seems to be having trouble catching his breath. "I just – please."

“Dean,” Cas says again. The look on his face is so tender Sam feels like he just walked in on them making out, or something. Cas moves from his chair to the edge of Dean’s bed, almost on impulse, like he would sit when Dean was detoxing.

Dean immediately reacts to Cas’s presence, curling closer, nosing into Cas’s shoulder. The action is intimate, something Dean’s only done to Sam on the rare occasion when he was in too much pain or had too high a fever to know what he was doing.

“Shhh,” Cas says. He drapes his free arm around Dean’s shoulders, tugs Dean’s head toward his chest. “It’s alright, Dean.” Cas turns his face and nuzzles his mouth into Dean’s hair; Sam might be wrong, but it looks like he drops a kiss onto Dean’s forehead. “You’ll be home soon, I promise.”

Cas keeps up an endless stream of whispered comforts. Finally, Dean quiets until his eyelids droop. Soon he’s nearly asleep.

By then, visiting hours are over, and Cas and Sam need to leave again. Sam leaves the ward with a discomforting heaviness in his stomach. He feels defeated, even though he tries not to. But he can’t deny that he’d hoped Dean would have…pulled himself together by now. True, he’s talking again and not just staring blankly at a wall, but Sam’s not sure a weepy, anxious, and desperate older brother is much improvement.

“We’ll get him back, Sam,” Cas says on their way back to the bunker. Cas’s voice is certain. Rock solid. And Sam doesn’t know how he does it; Cas has been unflinching throughout this whole ordeal. Sam doesn’t know how he’d have done any of it without him.

“I hope so, yeah,” Sam says. And he doesn’t know what to do, because Dean’s right: he can’t stick around in the hospital much longer before the doctors start throwing around words like *paranoid schizophrenia*, and impatient treatment is out of the question unless Eileen turns up anything promising from her hunting contacts because she’d promised she’d look for a psychiatrist with hunter roots.

“We’ve always gotten him back before,” Cas says, and he sounds so sure. “From Michael. The Mark. From *Hell*. We’ll get him back from this, too.”

“Yeah,” Sam echoes himself, and he tries to believe it.

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It's subdued at the bunker. Sam is restless. Jack is moody. And Eileen isn't there because she had a second interview at the college, something that makes Sam says, "Shit, dammit, I totally forgot!" as soon as Jack gives them the message.

Cas can tell Sam feels guilty for forgetting about Eileen's appointment, but Cas doesn't know what to say to make it better; it feels like Cas has run out of encouragement for the day.

Instead, he hides in Dean's bedroom again and thumbs through more real estate listings in the area. The more he thinks about it, the more Cas warms up to the idea of moving somewhere else. An actual house.

Dean's done a good job of transforming the bunker into a home, but it's really designed to be headquarters, and with neither Sam nor Eileen hunting and Dean…well Cas doesn't think Dean will be hunting much anymore, either, then they won't exactly be using the bunker for what it's made for.

Maybe they could open the bunker to other hunters in the area, set it up at a sort of center of operations for a network of hunters; Cas will have to talk about it with Sam later. He knows Sam and Eileen have already got a database of hunter contacts in the works, and Sam's been digitizing the bunker's ample archives for years now; it wouldn't hurt them to be a little more organized, to keep up what Sam started during the days of the apocalypse hunters.

And Cas wouldn't mind somewhere smaller. Somewhere a little comfier. Somewhere with a couch and windows and a dining room with plenty of room for when Dean wanted to cook family dinners. He's been to Sam and Eileen's apartment once or twice. It was snug and warm. Safe. Something like that would be nice.

Maybe Cas could start a garden. He still likes bees; bees like gardens. And Jack would have his own room. Someplace he could actually bring friends if…well. Maybe a new place would give Jack permission to try to make some new friends. Or maybe Cas could see if Jody and the girls wanted to come down. Jack had only met Claire once. Maybe it would good if they could get to know each other a little better.

And maybe Dean wouldn't mind so much, moving out of the bunker now that Sam was gone. It could give him something new to concentrate on. They wouldn't have money enough for a new place. They would have to get a…Cas believes they're called a *fixer-upper*. And Dean's good with things like that, puttering around and fixing

things. Dean would still have his own room to decorate, but he could have the rest of the place, too.

Cas doesn't care about things like matching curtains and throw pillows. He doesn't think Dean cares about them either, but, either way, Dean could choose whatever he wanted. He'd care more about the kitchen, anyway. And it would be nice to have a prettier kitchen, instead of the bunker's industrial one.

And Cas could have his…own room, too, he supposed. Everyone could have their own room.

Cas still doesn't know how they could afford it. Cas might have to start looking for a job. He's not sure what he's qualified to do, but he did alright at the Gas-N-Sip. He could easily get another position at a convenience store. It wouldn't be enough for a house, of course. But with he, Jack, and Dean all contributing something they could make it work.

Cas will have to talk it over with Sam. And Dean, of course, as soon as Dean gets well. Because Dean will get well, Cas knows it. Dean will beat this, just like he's beat so many other things, and Cas will be there for him until he does, and – and after, too.

For as long as Dean wants him.

So, Cas keeps flipping through the listings, bookmarking the ones that look interesting: tiny farmhouses on the outskirts of town with plenty of land around them, because he knows Dean won't want a lot of neighbors. And he makes sure to keep within twenty minutes of Sam and Eileen's because Dean won't want to be too far from his brother, either.

He eventually finds one that's only a half hour away, on the other side of the Lebanon, and Cas thinks about how Dean's come to know several of the shop owners and members of the community, and maybe it wouldn't hurt to stay in the town.

The next morning, Cas asks Jack if he wants to go for a drive, and tells the boy to bring an EMF detector, because Cas isn't going to be stupid enough to move into a haunted house.

"A hunt?" Jack asks curiously. Cas can tell Jack's been cooped up for too long. He's itching for something to do, and house hunting isn't going to exactly cut it. Cas will have to figure something else out. Because it's not like Jack can tail behind them on hunts anymore. Not

with Dean – and, well, Cas isn't going to want to leave Dean alone.

"Not exactly," Cas answers.

Jack talks about a movie series he's been watching while they drive, and Cas enjoys listening to him talk, but it strikes him that maybe Jack might be lonely, now that he doesn't have his Grace anymore and nothing to do. It strikes him, also, that maybe Jack should be thinking about school, or something – whatever people his age are supposed to think about.

Sam did a good job of getting Jack up to scratch on basic mathematics and reading, but Cas never thought to ask Jack about what *he* wanted, whether there was anything else he wanted to do with his life.

And that makes Cas feel guilty, because only two days ago he told someone that Jack was his son. Cas should be acting more like a father.

"Jack," Cas starts, interrupting Jack mid-sentence. "Are you…happy?"

Jack shrugs. "I wish we were altogether in the bunker again. But I'm happy I'm back. I'll be happier when Dean's back."

"I will too," Cas murmurs. "I meant…are you happy with what you're doing with your life? You're human, now. And there's an entire world out there. You could do anything you wanted to."

"But I want to be a hunter," Jack says.

"That's only because it's all you've ever known," Cas adds. And even though Dean isn't quite warmed up to the idea of Jack yet, Cas doesn't think Dean could stand the idea of forcing another kid into the way of life he was forced into. "You could do other things, too. Sam once went to college. He wanted to be a lawyer."

"I don't think I'd like to be a lawyer," Jack answer.

"I don't think you'd have to be a lawyer," Cas says. "You could be something else. A doctor? Or a construction worker. Dean was a construction worker once. And he's also a talented mechanic. I believe he wanted to be a fireman as a child. You could choose whatever you wanted."

"Free will," Jack says with a wise nod. "Really free now that God's gone."

“Yes,” Cas agrees. “It will…well, we should take advantage of it. It was a hard fight. We should be able to enjoy our reward.”

Jack nods thoughtfully. “I like fishing,” he says. “Dean took me. When I was dying…the first time.”

Cas can’t help but smile. “Yes, Dean enjoys fishing, as well. Perhaps we can go sometime.” *When this is over,* Cas doesn’t say. *When things get better.*

“I still, ah, dream about them,” Jack says after a pause. He sounds small and tentative.

Cas takes his eyes off the road long enough to look at Jack, finds the boy is staring at the passing farmland.

“Chuck and Amara,” Jack adds. “I keep remembering what it felt like to…meet their power with mine. It felt like it was tearing me apart.”

“It nearly did,” Cas remembers. And he tries not to think about finding Jack, unconscious in that field, blood trickling out of his nose and down his pale face. Cas had thought he’d just gotten Jack back from the Empty, only to have him torn away again. It was too much.

“And I, ah,” Jack clears his throat. “I dream about Mary, too.”

“Jack –” Castiel starts, throat tight, because he’s said it before and he doesn’t know how to say it in a way that will make it stick. He doesn’t know how to say anything right, these days.

“I know I was soulless,” Jack protests before Cas can get a word out. “But it was still me. It’s still my memories. It was still my power that –”

“She’s at peace now, Jack,” Cas says firmly. “Whatever the reason for her death; she’s at peace.”

“It doesn’t make it better,” Jack says unhappily, and Cas doesn’t know what to say. He should ask Sam to talk to Jack; they have the experience of being soulless in common. Maybe it could help.

Because Cas certainly doesn’t know what to do.

There are just so many things, and Cas feels like he’s trying to juggle them all at once, but they keep tumbling out of hand and breaking on the floor. Cas has been so distracted by Dean lately that he’s neglected

Jack. And he can tell that the strain has been wearing down Sam. At least Sam has Eileen, but she doesn't quite understand the unique dynamic between the Winchester brothers, yet. It will take some adjustments. From all parties.

"You can talk to me, you know," Castiel says softly, and it makes Jack turn away from the window, so that's a start. "If you're having nightmares, I'd like to know."

"I know," Jack shrugs, and he almost looks bashful. "But everyone's been so worried about Dean…."

"That doesn't make your struggles any less valid," Cas says.

By then they've arrived at the house. It's a small farmhouse, two stories, lots of windows, with a sagging front porch, and an old barn that's been converted into a garage – which will be handy, because Cas knows Dean will want to keep the Impala out of the elements.

There's a *For Sale* sign in the front yard, swaying slightly in the breeze. The lawn could do with some mowing, and the bushes out front should be trimmed, but, over all, it's a pretty place, and Cas smiles.

He tries to imagine what it must have looked like thirty or forty years ago. It's being sold by an elderly man. He might have raised his family here. At one point, there must have been children playing in the yard. Perhaps there was a tire swing hanging from the branch of the old oak in the front.

Perhaps he owned chickens. Cas wonders if Dean would let them get chickens. Dean likes eggs; it would be nice to have fresh ones for breakfast.

There's no way he'd let them get a dog. Dean doesn't like dogs. And he's allergic to cats, so they couldn't get one of those, either. Unless maybe it was one that lived in the barn.

"Are we going inside?" Jack asks, prodding Cas out of his daydreams, and Cas snaps to attention.

"Oh, yes, of course," he says, and he climbs out of the front seat of his truck. On the passenger side, Jack mirrors him.

The house is empty. There aren't any cars parked in the driveway. Cas doesn't know how humans shop for houses. He glimpses the number

of a real-estate agent on the sign, and he thinks maybe he should have called it, but, oh well, he knows how to get into an empty house. It won't be a problem.

Cas picks the lock, just like Sam taught him too, all those years ago, and he and Jack enter.

"What are we looking for?" Jack whispers as they cross the threshold.

"Just see if you like it," Cas says with a shrug.

He and Jack separate soon after, Jack waving the EMF detector at anything that looks suspicious. The front door opens immediately into an open floorplan: living room in the front and dining room in the back. Cas enters the living room; it's cleared of any furniture, so it looks large and his footsteps echo in the emptiness of it. But it's a snug room. Sunlight spills onto the floor through the windows. There's a fireplace against the wall.

There's room for a television. They could set up a couch and a couple chairs to watch movies or sports games. Cas knows Dean and Sam like to watch football, sometimes, even though they never have enough time to keep up with any particular team.

Cas keeps walking. The floor is made of wood, scuffed up from years of wear, but it looks sturdy, and maybe a little roughness isn't so bad.

The dining room is even brighter than the living room, because there are large glass doors that lead onto a back porch. They could put a grill out there. Cas knows Dean likes to grill because he used to watch him, while he lived at Lisa's. The backyard is nice. It spills into the woods, but there's a good section cleared out, enough for a fire pit. Sam likes fires, Cas knows, often talks about toasting marshmallows and other things on sticks.

The kitchen is perfect too. Dean will like it. It's old – not as old as the bunker's – but old enough not to be all shiny stainless-steel appliances Cas knows Dean doesn't like. The fridge's corners are rounded, and there's a gas stove, not electric, which Dean will be happy with, because he's complained how electric stoves don't heat evenly, that gas is the only thing respectable cooks should use.

There's a rickety staircase in the corner, which must lead to the bedrooms above. According to the listing there are three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. Cas climbs upward. He can already hear Jack rooting around in one of the bedrooms, EMF still buzzing, but

thankfully not beeping.

There's one large bedroom – Dean can have that one – that overlooks the back. And then there are two smaller bedrooms at the end of the hall. Jack can have his pick.

Cas supposes he'll have whichever one's left over.

Unless Dean –

And then the bathroom is nice. It will need to be refinished, because there's black mold in the corners of the tubs, and rust on the exposed piping under the sinks. The tile floor is buckled with water damage, but it's nothing Dean won't be able to handle, Cas knows.

He runs into Jack coming out of the bathroom. The boy is smiling, and he tucks the detector into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Well," Cas asks, "Do you like it?"

"I like it," Jack says with a grin, and, for the first time in days, Cas smiles, too.

"Good," he says.

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"I obviously can't force you to bring Dean to a facility," Dr. Jorgensen says that afternoon. He's speaking to Cas and Sam across his desk. His fingers are teepeed in front of his chin. "That will be a decision between yourselves and Dean, but I do strongly recommend it. Dean could very easily spiral toward another suicide attempt if you don't take psychiatric intervention seriously.

"I've supplied you with literature on several hospitals within the area. I highly recommend one that specializes in dealing with trauma," Dr. Jorgensen continues. "I could easily provide a referral for your brother to any one of them. And I understand cost can be an issue, but I urge you not to let that stop you."

"Thank you," Cas answers, and he takes the brochures Dr. Jorgensen offers from across the desk. Sam is too busy looking at his hands to react. "But Dean will be able to return home tomorrow?" Cas says.

"Yes," Dr. Jorgensen says after a pause. "He participated in group therapy today, and he was much calmer during our individual session.

We will have to make biweekly follow-up appointments so I can keep track of his medication."

"We can do that, yeah," Sam says quickly.

"Alright," Dr. Jorgensen says, and shows them out of his office. "You can schedule an appointment at the front desk."

Cas leaves Sam to make an appointment for Dean in the next two weeks, after which they go in to see Dean together.

He looks more alert this time. He isn't shaking. His eyes are clearer. But he still looks unusually downcast and very unlike his typical snarky self.

"Doc say I'm allowed to leave?" Dean asks as soon as Cas and Sam come in.

"Yeah," says Sam, and Dean almost deflates in relief.

Cas can hear the note of reluctance in Sam's voice, and he's sure Dean picks up on it, as well, because Dean says uncertainly, "So that's it then, right? I'm going home tomorrow."

"The doctor thinks you should go for impatient treatment," Sam says. It's abrupt. Pulling the band-aid off all at once, and Cas almost winces, mostly because Dean blanches.

"But I can't," Dean says. There's a dangerous tone of desperation in his voice again, similar to the hysteria that took over the afternoon before, and Cas braces for the worst. "You know why I can't, Sammy _"

"Dean," Cas says calmly at the same time Sam says, "Dean, listen, man _"

"Sammy, please," Dean says. A moment ago, he was fine; now there are tears swimming in his eyes, and his good hand shakes as he balls it into a fist. A wave of guilt crashes over Cas, and it suddenly feels like he and Sam have cornered Dean. Like they were Julius Caesar's friends, all carrying knives.

"We talked last night, Cas and I," Sam says carefully.

"You talked?" Dean says, and what comes out next won't be pleading; it's anger now, wavering behind Dean's eyes, doing its best to shunt

his fear out of the way. “You and Cas fucking talked?”

“Don’t be like this, Dean,” Sam starts.

“Dean,” Cas intervenes swiftly, hoping he can head off an explosion, because the last thing they need right now is yelling. “Just listen for a minute. You’re right –” Cas tacks on quickly, and Dean relaxes by an iota. “We can’t easily send you to a facility. But Sam and I and Dr. Jorgensen all agree that you do need more treatment.”

“So, you have to promise you’ll take the meds,” Sam cuts in rapidly before Dean can open his mouth. “You have to promise us that you won’t start drinking again. That you’ll make the appointments. And we won’t ask you to go. But you have to promise, man. I’m sorry, but you have to.” There’s a mixture of emotions, all fighting for dominance, on Sam’s face: fear, worry, anguish.

Cas turns to Dean, and he watches as the man closes himself off. Brick by brick he builds the wall back up. Behind the stones, Cas can see the hurt, and his heart aches.

“Dean,” Cas says, willing Dean to understand, to somehow know how desperately Cas and Sam want him to be okay, to not have to worry he might do something foolish again. “We don’t know how else to help you. You need to tell us how we can help.”

“I don’t need your fucking help,” Dean says.

Sam’s face falls. “We all know that’s not true.” For a moment Dean blinks like he’s been slapped in the face, but then the wall is back in place. He looks cold. Unresponsive. Stubborn.

Cas wants to shake him until his teeth rattle, wants to scream at him *don’t you get it? Don’t you understand that we love you? That we can’t lose you?*

It’s silent. There aren’t any clocks on the walls of Dean’s room, so Cas doesn’t know how long they just sit there. It might have been ten seconds, ten minutes, an hour.

“So, do you promise?” Sam says, and his voice is hardened, too, brooking no arguments.

Dean doesn’t look at his brother. He doesn’t look at Cas, either, and Cas feels like something’s somehow been broken. The easy intimacy and comfort he and Dean had drawn over the past few days crumbles

in the wake of this betrayal that Cas hadn't even fully realized was a betrayal.

"Whatever," Dean mutters. He opens and closes his left fist, almost like he's thinking about sinking it into the wall, like he did with his right, or perhaps his brother's face.

"No, Dean," Sam says. Half of his voice is firm, the other sounds near tears. "That's not good enough."

Dean's eyes land on Sam's face, fiery and painful and hard. "Fine," he bites. He moves his eyes away, again. "I fucking promise. Whatever, Sammy."

OOO

Three months ago

Eileen and Dean have been driving all night and half the morning by the time Dean checks the rearview mirror and nearly swerves the car into the middle of traffic.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Dean exclaims, and Michael, in the backseat, frowns.

"I am the son of God," Michael says.

"Don't fucking do that!" Dean says, and he knows he's only angry because appearing randomly in the backseat of cars is what Cas does, and Dean still doesn't know where the hell Cas is.

"I apologize," says Michael.

"What do you want?" Eileen says. She'd grabbed her gun as soon as Michael appeared, but now she relaxes.

"And how the hell did you find us?" Dean demands. "I still have angel warding carved into my ribs."

"That's true," Michael answers Dean first. "But she does not." He nods to Eileen, and Dean makes a mental note to get Eileen angel warding as soon as possible. "And I assumed the two of you would be together."

"Fucking Yahtzee," Dean spits.

Michael ignores him. "I can only assume you are on your way to face God."

“No,” Dean snaps. “We’re on our way to get my fucking brother back.”

Michael shakes his head. “This is exceedingly foolish. You should wait to regroup with the Nephilim.”

And Dean nearly crashes the car again. “What fucking Nephilim?” He yells.

Michael says, like it’s supposed to be information Dean already has: “The one that rescued Castiel from the Empty.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Present Day

When Cas and Sam bring Dean back to the bunker, Dean heads immediately to his room, shuts the door behind him, and doesn't give any indication he'll be coming out again any time soon.

Cas chalks it up to the fact that Dean must be tired. He carefully surveyed all the possible side effects of Dean's new medication, and drowsiness is at the top of the list. Dean was silent and glum on the ride back from the hospital. Cas tries not to think too hard about it.

"He'll come around," Sam says with a shrug.

"Of course," Cas agrees.

"Listen, I, ah," Sam says, and rubs the back of his neck. "If you need me to stick around…but maintenance around the complex is really piling up…"

"No, Sam," Cas says quickly. "You should go. Spend the night with Eileen. Dean will be fine with us."

"Okay," Sam says hesitantly. "Because you know I could –"

"Sam," Cas cuts him off. "It's okay."

Sam nods, but he looks unhappy and uneasy. He leaves, at which point it's again just Cas left in the kitchen, because Jack isn't awake yet. He doesn't often get out of bed before noon.

Cas makes a plate of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for Dean for an early lunch. He finds he's strangely nervous when he reaches Dean's door.

He swallows back his worry, and knocks on the door.

"What?" Dean says from within, voice heavy and a little irritated, and Cas bites back a wince, because maybe this won't be as easy as he'd hoped it would be.

“I brought, ah, lunch,” Cas says, peaking his head through the door.

Dean’s in bed, wrapped in several blankets, and watching something on his laptop. His wan face is lit from below by the laptop screen, making him look even more washed out and skeletal than he actually is.

“I don’t need a nursemaid,” Dean snaps.

“Of course not,” Cas says. But there’s something hard pulsing in his chest. It hurts. He remembers walking out on Dean, all those months ago, waiting desperately for Dean to call him back but knowing with horrible, aching certainty that he wasn’t going to. “I just thought you might want to rest,” Cas says lamely.

He takes a step inside, just enough so he can slide the plate of sandwiches onto Dean’s desk. Then he takes a step back.

“Ah,” Dean says, he sounds gruffly apologetic, but Cas turns his back. The hard thing in his chest is cold now, rapidly swelling until it fills his lungs. “Thanks.”

Cas understands that the proper human response is *you’re welcome* or perhaps the more casual *no problem*. But Cas can’t say it. Because there is a problem. Cas is the problem. Dean is the problem. The problem is that Cas just wants to help, but Dean won’t let him, or Cas keeps doing something wrong.

So, Cas shuts Dean’s door behind him, maybe harder than he intended, and he goes back to the kitchen.

He has his own plate of peanut butter and jelly there. He hadn’t brought it with him, because he hadn’t wanted to impose. He’d thought idly of asking Dean if he didn’t mind company, going back to get his own food if Dean wanted him to…but clearly Dean wants to be alone, right now. Cas can’t exactly blame him. He’s had to deal with his privacy violated in all sorts of ways at the hospital over the past three days. Cas can understand wanting to reassert personal boundaries.

Without his Grace, Cas can taste regular food again, and, in the past, he’s very much enjoyed peanut butter and jelly, but now he finds the experience strangely unsatisfactory. The bread is soggy. The peanut is the leftover organic kind Sam likes, so it’s grainy and too dry. And the sweetness of the jelly, which Cas usually likes, today tastes like nothing.

He gives up after half the sandwich; then he just sits at the kitchen table, looking at his hands, and thinking about nothing. He supposes that he's sulking, although he doesn't really care, because it's not like there's anyone around to complain about it.

And Cas is tired. He's done enough for the past week. He deserves to sulk for a little while. Because Sam and Dean are certainly no strangers to sulking. And Jack sulks, too, almost all the time, now. So Cas should be allowed to – to sulk.

Near dinner time, Cas works up enough courage to go check on Dean again, preparing to get his head bitten off.

His knock is answered by a muffled groan from within, and Cas wonders if he might have woken Dean from a nap. He finds he doesn't care very much if he did or not. When he opens the door, his suspicions about the nap are furthered: Dean's still in bed, his room is pitch black, and he's holding a pillow over his head with the arm in a cast, lying sprawled on his stomach like he usually does when sleeping.

"What do you want to eat for dinner?" Cas asks, trying not to let his irritation come through his voice.

"Not hungry," Dean replies weakly from under his pillow.

It's one time too many. The same damn excuse.

"You need to eat, Dean," Cas says, exasperation bleeding through despite his best efforts. He spots that the plate of peanut butter and jelly is gone from the desk, but it's been transferred to the nightstand, where Cas sees Dean's only eaten one or two bites.

"You didn't eat lunch?" Cas says, even though the evidence is right in front of his eyes. Part of him – a small, petty, and waspish side – wonders if Dean will still have the gall to lie about it.

"Couldn't keep it down," Dean croaks, and he sounds miserable instead of like he's rearing for a fight, so miserable, in fact, that Cas finds some of his previous irritation ease away.

"How are you feeling?" Cas asks tentatively, not sure if he can handle it if Dean says fine, but Dean surprises him again.

"Like crap," Dean says. "Couldn't look at the computer. Everything's fucking spinning."

Cas takes another step into the room, hoping that the fact Dean didn't immediately tell him to go is a positive sign. "It's likely the medication. It has multiple unpleasant side effects. The doctor said they should pass in –"

"Fuck that," Dean interrupts, voice still muzzy from talking beneath a pillow. "They're just…just a fucking placebo, Cas. They're only gonna make me feel like shit."

Cas takes the remaining few steps to Dean's bed. He wants to peel the pillow off Dean's head, but he stays his hand, not sure how Dean will respond to touch right now. "Regardless, Sam and I would like you to try them."

Dean shifts, shrugging the pillow off and lifting his head. He blinks at Cas sluggishly. "Yeah, I got that loud and clear," he says, voice half-way snide and half-way hurt, and Cas again feels guilty for the way the last conversation in the hospital occurred.

"I'm sorry if we sounded harsh," Cas says.

Dean doesn't answer. He lets himself fall back against the mattress.

"May I sit down?" Cas asks, not sure where the wave of sympathy comes from, but Dean's hair is mussed and greasy. He looks tired and sick. Cas would like nothing more than to put his hand on his back, between his shoulder blades, rub up and down his spine until the tension from his muscles went away.

Dean shrugs, makes a noncommittal voice in the back of his throat, and Cas decides that's all the permission he's likely to get, so he perches on the edge of Dean's mattress. It might be his imagination, but Cas thinks Dean might edge closer to Cas's leg.

There are degrees of misery for Dean, Cas is learning – mild to moderate pain results in snark and annoyance, but once it crosses a certain threshold, he turns pliant and clingy, desperate for any kind of comfort. Cas can't tell on which side of the divide Dean is on now.

Dean fumbles for the pillow again, finds it and pulls it back over his head. The move reminds Cas of something a child might do, and he fights the sudden impulse to smile.

"Does your head hurt?" Cas asks softly.

"Mmh," Dean grunts. There's a pause, then he says, "Fucking always

hurts. And my hands keep shaking. Can't fucking make them stop."

Cas stops himself from reminding Dean that the shaking hands can't convincingly be blamed on the medication, because it's something he's been dealing with for some weeks now. But Cas doesn't think Dean would appreciate it, so he says instead, "I'm sorry, Dean," because he knows it isn't like Dean to be so candid about his pain.

"I probably can't even shoot a fucking gun," Dean says. His voice is full of so much despair Cas's hand spasms on the mattress in a desire to touch him, to hold him, to make it go away.

"That's something you can worry about later," Cas says.

Dean takes a deep breath. Cas tries to ignore how it trembles slightly. Sam had remarked in the hospital how strange it was that Dean was crying so often. But it didn't seem strange to Cas. After all, Cas suspected that Dean cried much more often in front of Cas than he allowed himself to cry in front of Sam.

"Can I touch you?" Cas asks.

"Fucking whatever, man," Dean says, but he doesn't sound angry more than simply exhausted.

Cas finds Dean's shoulder with his palm, presses firmly, runs his hand across Dean's shoulders, then changes direction, tracing Dean's spine under his shirt. He repeats the process slowly, noting how tense Dean is under his touch.

"Make a shitty masseuse, dude," Dean says. "You're supposed to use your thumbs."

"Perhaps you'll have to show me some time," Cas says before he can think. He hadn't meant it as a flirtation, not really. And he has a fleeting second in which he hopes Dean won't take it as such, but will instead assume Cas is just being obtuse. But Dean stiffens slightly under Cas's hand.

"What is this, some kind of fucked up porno?" Dean snorts, his voice is painfully lighthearted. A tone Cas knows Dean only uses when he's trying too hard.

Dean rolls out from under Cas's hand, lets the pillow fall away, and props himself up on his left elbow, drawing his hurt right arm into his lap. He lands on the other side of the bed; there's a good foot of space

between he and Cas, now, and Cas knows he messed up.

He messed up, again, and he doesn't know how.

Cas smiles weakly. "I suppose you would know better than I," he jokes, because that's what humans do to save face: make jokes.

It works; Dean answers with a smile of his own, but it only lasts for a minute before he slumps against the mattress again, shutting his eyes. He looks wretched, and Cas feels bad for making him feel uncomfortable.

"What do you think you can eat?" Cas asks, returning to the safe ground of his original task.

Dean shrugs.

"Where's the kid?" Dean asks. Cas recognizes the deliberate change of subject.

"He's been in the gym for most of the afternoon," Cas says. He hesitates before adding, knowing Dean is still sensitive when it comes to Jack, "I think he's bored. He's restless."

Dean snorts. "I don't blame him. We haven't exactly been exciting company." The note of self-derision is evident in Dean's voice. "Kid deserves a better place than this to grow up in."

Cas's heart is suddenly beating unbearably quickly. He hadn't intended to approach Dean about the farmhouse until Dean was feeling better, but now seems like a good time to mention it.

"About that," Cas begins carefully. "Jack and I went to visit a…ah, a house the other day. I had thought – Sam and Eileen have their own apartment."

Cas chances a look at Dean, he sees that the other man has gone utterly still. His eyes are open, and he's staring straight ahead, not at Cas, with an indiscernible expression on his face.

"It's, um," Cas licks his lips. It's hard to concentrate. He should have planned out this conversation better in advance. "It's only fifteen minutes from here. On the other side of Lebanon –"

"That great, man," Dean says. His voice is strange. He sits up, back against the headboard.

And it strikes Cas suddenly that maybe he hadn't been as clear as he wanted to be, that maybe Dean thinks –

"I – um," Cas fumbles, not sure what's wrong with his tongue. "There's more than enough room for all three of us. I made sure that – only if you wanted to – I – and it doesn't have to be that house. I only thought maybe a change of location might…." Cas has the uneasy feeling he's only making things worse.

But at least Dean's looking at him now, but his expression is still unreadable. "Oh," he says after a minute. "I mean, if you don't want to stick around in the bunker…"

"It's not that," Cas says quickly. The panic in his belly is fast and cold. "I just wondered whether you might like it better if –"

"Hey, man," Dean says flatly. "If you want to leave, I won't stop you. You don't need to make this about me."

And the panic transforms into anger. Icy cold and sharp. Cas gets off the bed.

"I understand that I have left before," Cas says, fighting to keep his voice level. And he can't quite define the emotion rising in his chest. It's a combination of many things. Frustration. Pain. Sickening worry after watching Dean nearly die by his own hand twice in one week. "But please don't forget that sometimes you kick me out."

There's anger on Dean's face now, too. A dangerous flash in his eyes that Cas has seen multiple times on hunts. Dean slides out of the bed. He looks a little unsteady on his legs, but he faces Cas stubbornly from the other side of the mattress.

"I don't know what the fuck you think this is, Cas!" Dean spits. "Telling the damn hospital we were fucking partners –"

"It was the only way they'd tell me anything!" Cas shoots back. "You know that!"

"Yeah, because I wanted you in on all that shit!" Dean

"You're right," Cas sneers. "I should not have assumed you'd want me to know anything about you, Dean."

"Yeah?" Dean says. "Well I don't want you and Sam fucking prying into my fucking business!"

“You almost killed yourself, Dean!” Cas roars. Blood pounds inside his head. He can barely see, he is so angry. All the emotion he’s tried so hard to stifle over these past several days is crashing over him. Wave after wave. “Twice! And Sam and I would have had to bury you! That is our business!”

“I didn’t try to fucking kill myself!” Dean says, and maybe he’s just so used to lying to protect himself he just can’t help it anymore.

“Don’t give me that bullshit!” Cas shouts back. “This isn’t how your story’s allowed to end, Dean. I won’t let it. It isn’t fair to me or Sam.”

“That doesn’t get to be your fucking choice –” Dean chokes.

“Too bad!” Cas says. And maybe he sounds a little like an impetuous toddler, but he doesn’t care. He is so sick of Dean’s attitude. He is so sick of the thanklessness he receives from Dean when all he’s ever done is tried to help him, tried to answer him how he needs to be answered, tried to give him everything he’s asked for. Space or comfort or someone to use as a punching bag. He is sick of it.

“Well then maybe you should just get the hell out if you don’t like what you see,” Dean says. He’s shaking. Cas can see him practically vibrating, even in the poor light. They’re shouting so loudly that there’s no way Jack isn’t hearing this.

“You’re right,” Cas says. His throat aches. And he realizes, to his horror, that his eyes are filled with tears. He’s cried before, multiple times, but he’s never felt it quite like this. It feels like a tsunami is cresting inside of his head. He hopes that Dean can’t see in the darkness of the bedroom. “Maybe I should leave. Obviously, you still don’t want me here. And I refuse to let you treat me like this, anymore.”

Dean makes an odd sound – half way between a snort and a choked gasp. Cas doesn’t want to stick around for more shouting, so he turns on his heel, stalks toward the door. He’s reaching for the handle when he hears Dean’s quick footsteps.

Cas turns around. For a mad moment he’s sure Dean’s about to slam his fist into his face, but there’s a blazing look in Dean’s eyes, near terror, and he doesn’t lift his hands to attack, but instead his left palm find Cas’s chest and he shoves him back against the door with enough force to knock the breath from Cas’s lungs, and, before Cas can react, Dean plants his lips against his.

There's no time to think. Cas reacts on pure, hungry impulse. He opens his mouth to allow access to Dean's searching tongue, and he presses hard against Dean's mouth in answer to Dean's force. It isn't neat – it's messy and frantic, all teeth and too much saliva.

Cas hasn't been kissed often, but he knows the proper response. One arm winds around Dean's waist, tugs him tight against his body when, for a moment, it seems like Dean will step away, and fists his hand in Dean's t-shirt. The other hand wraps around Dean's head, holds his skull in place, fingers tangle in his short hair and tugs.

Dean groans against Cas's body, thumps his cast next to Cas's head, presses hard against him so Cas can barely breathe between the twin pressures of the door behind his back and Dean's chest against his front.

Cas has lived for millennia. He has seen continents formed and dissolved. Oceans flood and dry up. Mountains thrust from the collisions of tectonic plates. All of this has happened in a blink of an eye. But feeling Dean's lips on his, rough stubble, Dean's teeth biting into his lower lip too hard, the taste of Dean's breath in Cas's mouth: it's eternity.

Dean pulls away, breathing hard, chest heaving against Cas's. His eyes are red; there are droplets of water on Dean's eyelashes. Cas can feel chilly tear tracks down his own cheeks.

"Don't," Dean whispers against Cas's jaw. "Don't," he burrows his head into Cas's shoulder. "Cas, please."

Cas tightens his hold around Dean's torso. He drops his face into the crook of Dean's neck, presses a kiss to Dean's smooth, pale skin. "I won't," he promises, relaxing his fingers so his palm lays flat against Dean's back. "Dean, I'm here. I won't leave."

OOO

Three months ago

It all ends in Mr. and Mrs. Kline's house, 8715 Munro Avenue, a nondescript one-story ranch. Ground zero to what authorities ultimately end up identifying as a gas explosion. It took out four-blocks in every direction. Luckily most people were at work or school, so casualties were limited.

All Dean really remembers is a lot of light and noise. Jack was there,

and so was Cas, clutching Jack's shoulder. Jack was doing that glowing-shaking-screaming thing he does, Amara was trying to stop him, and Chuck-in-Sam's body was trying to duck out of the way.

That's when Dean started yelling, tried to charge right into it, but Eileen grabbed him by one arm, and Michael grabbed him by the other.

Somehow Sam – really Sam – met Dean's eyes from within the mass of blinding light, and the bitch actually had the wherewithal to smile. "It's okay, Dean," Sammy said. "It's gonna be okay."

Blaze of glory.

And then there was nothing.

Chapter End Notes

PSA: a lot of Dean's hesitancy to try medication comes from my own experience, but taking antidepressants turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made in my life, so, if that might be an option for you, please don't let stigma or fear or doubt get in your way to giving 'em a try.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> Warning: this chapter contains a fairly explicit flashback to an attempted rape. It occurs near the end, after the line “He lands hard on his knees and throws up into the toilet bowl, head spinning in response to the abrupt change in altitude” and goes until “Got back up again. Kept running.”

Present day

Dean sleeps through the whole night, all eight hours of it. But it’s the heavy, disorienting sleep that comes from being medicated, and when he wakes up his brain is sluggish and the rest of his body is groggy and slow to respond.

He would have closed his eyes again and let his drowsiness tug him back to sleep, except Cas is there, nudging his shoulder and saying quietly, “Dean, you should wake up. You need to take your medication.”

Dean cracks open an eyelid. His reflexes are shot, because Cas is literally right next to him, and Dean really should have woken up and grabbed for his gun under his pillow before he let anyone get so close to him while he was sleeping.

But Cas is tousle-haired and pale from sleep, and Dean remembers that, oh yeah, Cas slept there last night. After Dean kissed him. And the two of them cried like they were on some kind of cheesy ass Lifetime movie. Then Cas encouraged him to take a shower while Cas made dinner, and he urged Dean to actually eat at the kitchen table instead of in his bed, and Dean forced himself to eat half a plate of plain spaghetti because Cas didn’t know how to make tomato sauce.

Then Cas fumbled through the question, hands twisting in front of his chest, looking so Goddamned human it hurt. Asked Dean whether or not, because it was alright if Dean preferred to be alone, but whether or not Dean wanted Cas to – and Cas didn’t expect anything else – just –

At which point Dean couldn’t help but roll his eyes. He grinned and told Cas that if Cas didn’t spend the night in Dean’s room, then Dean would spend it in Cas’s, but that’d suck because Dean had a much

more comfortable mattress.

Cas's resulting smile was almost worth the anxious, unrelenting thud in Dean's stomach when he thought about Cas's body – right there – in Dean's bed. Cas's arm around his waist. Cas's lips against his. And – Cas said they didn't have to do anything else, and they hadn't.

But Dean knows there's an unspoken caveat of not yet. They don't have to do anything else yet. Not when Dean's still recovering or adjusting to his meds or whatever. But sometime. Probably sometime soon. Cas would want to do something else.

And Dean wants to do something else, too. He does. He can't deny those shameful, fleeting thoughts that cross his mind while he's masturbated before, of what Cas would feel like in bed, skin to skin, what Cas would taste like, what Cas's fingers would –

But the thought of all that now makes anxiety churn so violently in Dean's stomach that he feels like he's going to throw up.

Because the fact is, Dean's only had sex sober a few times since he was teenager. Probably just with Cassie and Lisa, because both were around long enough for Dean to dry out. It's just that sex is always better drunk. Less to think about. Easier to concentrate on just the bodies in the room. Easy to fixate on what really matters: make her come, first, then he can come. Then they can go again if she feels like it. It's easier when he's drunk. Easier not to fucking think. Not to feel. Not to lose himself or panic or some shit like he did once or twice with Lisa for no fucking reason and she had to talk him down from a panic attack when he was still naked. Which was really fucking embarrassing and nothing Dean ever wanted to happen again.

And he sure as hell never had sex sober with a man.

"Dean," Cas says again. He brushes Dean's hair back from his face, and Dean snaps to attention, because the gesture is definitely weirdly intimate, like beyond anything the two of them have been comfortable with before now.

"Hi," Dean says, smiling to cover up how breathless his voice sounds.

Cas smiles in return. His eyes crinkle. "I'll get you a glass of water," he offers. He's rolled off the bed before Dean can tell him not to go, because his presence in the bed is warm and comfortable, even though it makes Dean think too much.

Cas is back after a second, though, carrying a glass of water he filled from the sink, and he crawls back into bed with Dean. Cas is holding the glass of water, obviously waiting for Dean to sit up, so Dean complies, even though the dizziness from yesterday hasn't faded yet.

And he tries to stop the wave of despair from crashing over him, because he knows this new rush of discomfort and sickness is a result of the drugs, and it feels like he's slowly poisoning himself, one pill at a time. And now he just needs to take it again. And feel fucking miserable for another fucking day. And they just have him on the lowest dosage for the first two weeks, until he meets with the fucking psychiatrist again and he makes Dean take more.

But he promised. Otherwise Sam and Cas are going to chuck his ass in a facility. So, Dean swallows the ten mg. Zoloft tablet with a sip of water, and then he presses the Abilify capsule under his tongue, waits for it to dissolve before swallowing again. He's supposed to take it with food to lessen the chance of nausea, but Dean doesn't care.

He's taken his medicine like a good little boy. And now he wants to fucking sleep again.

He nestled back down into his pillows. He can feel Cas's eyes on him.

"Can I kiss you?" Cas asks.

Dean opens his eyes again. His chest is tight. His stomach squirms weirdly. Cas's eyes are very blue. He looks earnest and thoughtful, and he's looking at Dean so unflinchingly that everything inside Dean wants to scream and run away.

"You know you don't have to ask every time," Dean says. Because he doesn't know how to say *yes, God yes.* And he doesn't know how to say *no*, either. Even though he doesn't want to have to say no to Cas.

"I just want to make sure you want me to," Cas says.

And Dean doesn't want to think about that last time with Lee, when he told Dean *I don't want to be someone you just fuck when you're drunk.* So, Dean gets up on his elbows, careful of the annoying cast on his right arm, and crosses the remaining distance between he and Cas before Cas can say anything else.

Dean plants his lips against Cas's, slightly rougher than he intended, but his pulse beats wildly in his throat, and it's hard to relax. He hopes Cas will interpret it as lust rather than the weird combination of

uncertainty and fear that it really is.

Cas gasps a little in surprise, but it doesn't last long before he kisses Dean back. And he's really not a half-bad kisser, considering the fact that he's had so little practical experience.

Dean pulls back, smiles like he knows the girls like, like he knows the guys in the dirty bathrooms and back alleys like, and says, "I want you to, Cas."

"Okay," Cas says, uncertainly matching Dean's smile.

"Would you, ah," Cas says, and everything inside Dean's body goes very still. He is achingly aware of his morning wood, and he has no idea what Cas is going to ask for, no idea how he's going to be able to get through it convincingly, and – "Would you like to get out of bed for breakfast today?" is what Cas asks.

Dean's so relieved that he says, "What the hell, sure," on impulse before he thinks through what getting up for breakfast actually entails – all the immeasurable steps it will take to actually make it to the kitchen: getting out of bed, putting on his sweatpants from where they're sitting in a bundle on the floor where he shucked them in favor of sleeping in just his boxers, brushing his teeth, heading to the bathroom to piss and maybe jack himself off real quick if his dick's still hard, walking to the kitchen, making breakfast – and even if it's just cereal and milk he'll have to pour it all into a bowl and eat it, spoonful after spoonful.

It's all so stupidly exhausting just to think about it that Dean falls back onto the pillows, tries so hard to swallow back the lump in his throat.

And what the hell? What the actual hell?

"Dean," Cas says softly. His fingers wind experimentally through Dean's hair, like he's testing out the idea that he doesn't need to ask every time. But this is okay. Dean doesn't even flinch. And it actually feels kind of nice. Just to have someone casually touch him. "You should try to get out of bed."

And Dean says, "Fuck you," in a way that's more friendly teasing than genuine annoyance because he doesn't want to argue with Cas. Not again. Not yet. Not when Dean almost made Cas leave again the night before.

Cas drops a kiss onto Dean's temple. The place where his lips touch

burns hot. Dean pulls in a breath of air before he can stop himself. And he knows that if he's hard, then Cas is probably hard, too, and that thought is enough to make Dean roll out of bed, because he – not yet. Not when he's already feeling so unbalanced because of the meds. He just needs to make sure his head's screwed on right before –

"Happy?" Dean throws over his shoulder as he bends to grab his sweatpants.

"No," Cas says with a frown that doesn't reach his eyes. "I much prefer being in bed with you." But he gets out on the other side of the bed. He's wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, and it's not like Dean hasn't seen Cas casually dressed before; he's seen it plenty of times, but somehow seeing him like this just after he got out of Dean's *bed* is different – and for a heart stopping moment, Dean's sure he's going to crawl across the bed or something to grab Cas around the waist, yank him back onto the mattress so he can plant his lips against his collar bone and –

Fuck. Dean forgets brushing his teeth in favor of getting the hell out of his room before either he or Cas does something stupid.

He doesn't stop until he's standing in the kitchen, and everything's still a little fuzzy and weird. Too slow. And he can't really remember right away why he's in the kitchen, but then Cas follows him into the room.

Dean makes the mistake of looking at him, seeing his hair is still sticking up in every Goddamn direction, and hasn't the guy ever heard of a Goddamn comb for God's sake?

"I believe we still have Crunch Cookie Crunch," Cas says from the doorway, and Dean remembers: right, breakfast.

The idea of eating cereal makes him want to shrivel up in a corner, but he's already decided that, if he's gonna play this role, he's gonna play it to the fullest, so he grunts, crosses the kitchen to the cabinet to get a bowl, and then to another cabinet to fish out the half-empty cereal box.

He thinks dry cereal might be easier on stomach, so he goes to the kitchen table without stopping by the fridge for milk. Cas walks over to the counter to fiddle with the coffeemaker – one of the few appliances he's really figured out how to manage in the kitchen.

Dean pours some cereal into his bowl, realizes he forgot a spoon,

decides he doesn't care, and starts picking it up piece by piece with his fingers. Chews mechanically. Swallows when he's supposed to. It's not as hard as he thought it would be.

Cas joins him a minute later, carrying two mugs of coffee. He slides one across the table to Dean. Grabs the box of cereal and stuffs his hand into the opening, bringing out a fistful of wafers.

And Dean doesn't know how to do this. He's a class-act one-night-stand guy. Gone before she can think about offering coffee in the morning. Dean doesn't do morning's after. He doesn't do *what are we* conversations.

But this is Cas, he tries to tell himself. Fucking Cas. And nothing's changed. They didn't even have sex. They just – kissed a little and then fell asleep in the same bed. Which has happened before. Not the kissing thing. But the falling asleep in the same bed thing. And it hasn't changed anything before, so it won't now.

"If we were to," Cas begins hesitantly and Dean's heart almost leaps up his throat and out of his mouth. "…move from the bunker," Cas continues, and Dean shovels a handful of cereal into his mouth so he can save face. "I understand we would need money to do so."

Cas isn't wrong. It takes a minute for Dean's mind to latch onto the welcome distraction, and he carefully mulls over what Cas is suggesting, even though his brain keeps wandering away to look at nothing for a while.

They've managed at the bunker because they're not exactly saddled with a mortgage here, or in need of gas or electricity or water. The streaming services and internet they've bummed off of their usual credit card racket, but they have near enough bona fide credit cards under Dean and Sam Campbell that Charlie hacked for them for around town: grocery runs and stuff. That's been paid for by whatever Bobby left them – the house wasn't worth shit, but the old cars and junk brought in enough to start a savings account, and the land sold well.

But it won't be enough for forever, and he and Sam have been careful to stretch it slowly. They work their old ways when they're on the road: fake cards and hustling. But that won't cover an actual house. What they've got left in the account won't even cover the down payment.

And Dean knows Sam's been preoccupied with this stuff with Eileen –

he knows the two of them have been searching for jobs to cover their apartment. And he feels momentarily guilty for not remembering to ask Eileen if she got that job at the community college she was after – he doesn't even remember when that interview was.

So, that meant jobs. And it wasn't like Kansas real estate was booming, or anything, so they could swing it, maybe, if both he and Cas got part time gigs. It wouldn't be extravagant, by any means, but it's not like they're used to living the high-life in the bunker.

Dean's not sure why Cas even wants to leave the bunker. There's nothing fucking wrong with living there. It's safe. The safest place any of them have ever lived, with its warding and protective spells, and not to mention it's made out of concrete and buried under the fucking ground.

But if Cas wants to leave –

Dean doesn't want to be in the bunker alone. And, right now, it seems like Cas is inviting Dean to come with him, so –

"Dean," Cas says, he's paused with his hand half-way buried in the cereal box again. "I didn't mean to worry you. This conversation can certainly wait –"

"There's, um," it takes a minute for Dean to find his voice. "There are all those old cars in the garage." It's been handy having them around – but it was better when they had other hunters living here, too. Now no one's used any of them in about two years. They're just sitting there gathering dust because Dean hasn't had the time to wash them lately –

He hasn't had the time to wash the Impala, lately, either. She's probably a mess. After…it's been longer than a week, now, since Dean last drove her.

He doesn't know if he's allowed to drive yet, with the meds. His hands are still trembling, but he's getting better at ignoring it, or maybe he's just losing track of his own body –

"Dean," says Cas. He puts his hand over Dean's fist.

Dean's not too sure how long he's just been staring at the wall behind Cas's head. He blinks hard a few times because his vision's a little fuzzy. His bowl of cereal is empty on the table, so at least he ate; Cas should be happy about that.

“We can talk about this later,” Cas says with an understanding smile.

“No,” Dean says. He swallows, tries to re-center his thoughts. “It’s okay. I was thinking we could – I could fix up some of the cars. They’d definitely fetch enough for a down payment, maybe a couple mortgage payments while we figured out the other stuff.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Cas says. Like he’s humoring a little kid or something.

Dean takes his hand back. He covers the motion by pouring himself another bowl of cereal. But now he has to eat it. He has to eat it if he doesn’t want to look weird.

“Where’s Jack?” Dean says. Because he needs something to say.

“He usually sleeps late,” Cas answers. “I don’t think he sleeps well. He has nightmares.”

Join the fucking club. But Dean doesn’t say it, because it’s not fair. Because it’s not the kid’s fault that he has nightmares. Probably dreams about killing Mary. About turning her into a little pile of ash with his mind just because he could. Just because she pissed him off. Dreams about summoning her empty corpse from Heaven, not even enough of her to attempt to bring her back, because she’d always been happier up there anyway.

Missed her imaginary sons more than the ones she still had in real-life.

“Dean,” Cas says softly, and it’s enough to make Dean realize he’s stopped breathing. Just holding his breath and staring at nothing. And Cas is staring at him.

Stupidly, like a little kid trying to hide, Dean puts his hand over his eyes. He means to carefully let go of his breath, but instead it bursts out of him all at once. And then he sucks in another, like a vacuum.

His heart thunders inside his chest. It’s all too much. And it’s stupid. It’s so stupid. Dean is stupid. Because it was fucking cereal and old cars they don’t even use and Cas isn’t going to leave, he said he wasn’t going to leave, and Mom’s been dead for almost year now, so Dean should just get fucking over it.

“Dean,” Cas says from across the table, voice strained. Because he obviously doesn’t know what to say. Because what the hell is anyone supposed to say to Dean when he can’t even hold himself together for

Goddamn breakfast? “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Dean sucks in another quaking breath.

“It’s supposed to –” he says between heaving breaths. He can’t get enough oxygen, and it makes him lightheaded, so he braces his head on the heel of his hand, elbow on the table. “Supposed to be fucking better.”

“Dean,” Cas says patiently. Infinitely patient. And secretly he must think Dean’s so pathetic.

“They were supposed to fucking fix this,” Dean manages to say. “Fuck it – the drugs are supposed to –”

“It’s going to take time, Dean,” Cas says. “The doctor said it’s going to take time.”

“F-fuck time,” Dean says. And Cas doesn’t say anything, just looks at him like he’s a dying puppy or some shit. And Dean doesn’t want that crap. He never asked for pity.

He’s pushing his chair back and standing before Cas can think about making a move to stop him. “I’m gonna shower,” he says.

“Dean, wait.”

Dean hears the chair legs scrape on the floor as Cas stands, and Dean wheels on him, “I’m fine,” he says, both hands raised. “I’m fine, Cas,” he tries to keep the note of hysteria out of his voice, tries to actually look fine, tries to convey how desperately he just needs to be alone for a minute. To not be seen. To not be sprawled open with all his guts hanging out, for one Goddamn minute.

Cas looks unhappy, but he nods. “Alright, Dean,” he says.

It’s the same way he says *hello, Dean* sometimes like Dean’s the only one in the room. Like Cas has to make absolute sure that Dean understands that Cas’s talking to him. And it makes Dean’s chest tighten in an entirely different way. In a way that reminds Dean that he and Cas woke up in the same bed this morning. And they kissed last night. And Dean managed to not freak out like he did the first time it happened.

And now Cas seems to think that –

And Dean *wants* him to think it. He does.

It's just –

He's in the bathroom before he fully registers walking down the hall, bows over the sink and tries to catch his breath.

He thinks about the razor in the pocket of his robe, but then he thinks that maybe it's not there anymore because he didn't think to check last night, and Cas saw the cuts on his arms, so maybe he took it away.

But all of the cuts on his arms have almost completely healed by now: just slightly raw pink lines, and they don't hurt.

There's a certain kind of pain, right on the edge of too much, a constant sting, almost a burn: that's the sweet spot of distraction. And Dean needs it. Needs it to all go away. Needs a fucking drink, because he wants the constant rush inside his head to disappear, and he knows it will disappear if he can just have a drink.

It's like the thought triggers it. Dean can almost taste the whiskey on his tongue, he wants it so bad, but then his stomach rebels, and bile rises in his throat so quickly he's almost too late diving into the stall for the toilet.

He lands hard on his knees and throws up into the toilet bowl, head spinning in response to the abrupt change in altitude.

Get the fuck off me. Dean gritted through his teeth. He thrashed, tried to get away, but the guy had one-hundred pounds on him, and had him bowed over the toilet, pinned with the porcelain seat uncomfortably digging into Dean's chest, and his arms twisted behind his back tight enough Dean was afraid his bad shoulder would pop out of the socket. Dean's forehead was an inch from the rusty pipe sticking out of the tank. Damp soaked through the knees of his jeans from the dirty bathroom floor.

I would have paid for it, whore, the guy rasped. His chin dug into the base of Dean's neck. His entire body enveloped Dean, and if Dean struggled too hard, he'd get a face full of toilet water. *You had your chance.*

Dean gulped, panic ferocious and uncontrollable in his belly. He stared at the water in the bowl and thought he was going to be sick. If he was sick, maybe the guy would let him go.

The guy released Dean's arms with one hand, kept a fist clamped tight around Dean's wrists, reached around and under Dean's stomach to fumble with the button of Dean's jeans, tugged down the zipper. He wasn't supposed to take his clothes off, that was a rule. Blowjobs only. Clothes stay on. No kissing. Those were his terms.

S-stop. Dean said, and he was disgusted by the naked terror in his voice, but at the same time he was powerless to stop it. Because fear pounded so thick inside his skull he couldn't even see anymore.

The guy nuzzled his face close to Dean's ear, whispered so Dean could feel his hot, wet breath on his skin. His whiskers rubbed like sandpaper on Dean's neck. *I own you.*

One-handed, he yanked down Dean's jeans. The fabric caught and bunched on Dean's thighs where his legs were spread too wide to let them come down any further. The guy dug a finger into the elastic waistband of Dean's boxers, pulled down until the boxers pooled against Dean's jeans.

Then he wrapped his rough hand around Dean's dick. Squeezed. Dean gasped in pain before he could stop himself.

The guy laughed. Stroked Dean, once, twice, three times, whispered: *maybe I'll make you come first, sweetheart. I can make you do anything I want.*

And Dean could feel himself hardening under the guy's hand. And no no no no fuck no because Dean didn't want – Dean wouldn't let him –

A sob rose in Dean's throat, choked him, and he couldn't help but gulp out an ugly, weak noise of protest, and a warm tear slithered down Dean's cheek, fell into the toilet, made ripples across the bowl.

How 'bout we slick you up first, babe?

The guy took his hand away from Dean's dick, reached around him instead, fished with warm fingers for Dean's face, found Dean's mouth, and Dean just fucking opened his lips on instinct to let the guy's fingers in, sucked them because he knew that was what he was supposed to do, curled his tongue around them because he knew how to make it good – fucking learned how to make it good –

It was going to hurt, Dean thought wildly. It was going to hurt because Dean had never had it up his ass before and the spit wouldn't be enough and the guy was pissed off enough that he wanted to make

it hurt.

The guy groaned with his fingers still in Dean's mouth, rutted up against Dean's bare thighs, and something hot and hard nudged the base of Dean's ass.

Just take it, Dean thought. Just fucking take it. Just relax. If he relaxed and stopped struggling it wouldn't hurt so badly. It would be over soon. It was just sex.

I own you, the guy said again. *Before I'm done with you, I wanna hear you beg.*

And Dean just snapped. Chomped down so hard on the fingers in his mouth he heard something snap, tasted blood, and the guy howled.

Dean whipped his head up as hard as he could. Cracked the back of his skull against the guy's chin. It was enough to give Dean an opening. The guy reeled backward with another startled cry. Dean let himself fall to the side, landed on the floor, twisted onto his back, and kicked as hard as he could with both feet. His boots landed hard against the guy's exposed groin.

All the air in the guy's body rushed out of his mouth in a strangled shout of agony. He doubled over, hands over his dick, blood dripping from his bitten fingers onto the floor. There was blood on the guy's lips, too. He must have bitten his tongue when Dean hit him with his head.

Dean was up on unsteady legs in no time. Spit blood out of his mouth. Pulled his boxers and jeans back up. Ignored that he couldn't even zipper his pants because his fingers trembled so hard. Ignored how he was still half-hard. Ignored how he could remember the guy's palm on his dick.

The guy was still down, forehead pressed to the filthy concrete floor. Dean had time to get out. Go through the door. Run. Don't look back.

But the guy was down. And there was a humming energy coursing through Dean's limbs. Like he got on a hunt when he knew he was headed for the kill shot. So, he kicked the guy, one, two, three times in the ribs until he curled in on himself, whimpering. And then Dean kicked him in the face, felt his nose snap under Dean's steel-toe boot. Blood spurted. The back of the guy's head cracked against the base of the toilet and he went still. Silent.

Dean thought there was a chance he actually killed him.

And good. Good. Dean hoped he was dead.

He just stood there, breathing hard, looking at the blood on the floor. The guy lay there with his pants around his knees. Dean could see the tip of his wallet sticking out of his pocket, so Dean lunged for it, nearly dropped it, stuffed it into his back pocket, and left.

And Dean can still, twenty-two years after, feel the slap of winter air on his face as soon as he stepped outside the bathroom, tripped over his feet, caught himself, broke into a run, kept running until he tripped again and sprawled across the pavement. Scuffed up his palms and his cheek when he faceplanted on the gravel.

Got back up again. Kept running.

Dean's breath saws in and out of his mouth. He dry heaves a couple more times over the toilet. Slowly, the here and now filter back in.

He's in the bunker. He's in the bunker and he's forty-one years old. Not nineteen. Not running back to a crummy hotel room with his fifteen-year-old kid brother doing chemistry homework on one of the two beds. Carrying a stolen wallet and his dick pressing into the front of his jeans. And he refused to touch himself for nearly two weeks afterward.

"Dean," says Cas from outside the door, a measure of concern in his voice that suggests it's not the first time he's called him. "Dean, I'm coming in."

No. Fuck no. Cas can't find Dean like this. Cas can't know. And if he sees Dean – if he – Cas will know. He'll read Dean's frikken mind or something, look at him until he just sees it.

But Dean can't move. He's limp against the side of the stall. Shaking faintly. So lightheaded that his vision keeps popping with dark spots and he's actually afraid he's going to pass out.

The bathroom door swings open. It only takes a second for Cas to spot Dean in the stall and rush forward.

"What happened?" Cas demands. He grabs for Dean. Dean's too weak to flinch away. He closes his eyes. He doesn't want to see Cas. Maybe if he keeps his eyes shut, Cas won't be able to see inside his head. "Are you alright?"

Cas's hands paw all over Dean's body. Find his face, prop Dean's chin up, checks his head for any injuries, presses two fingers to Dean's thrumming pulse under his jaw, lays the back of his fist to Dean's forehead to check for a fever. Then his hands find Dean's wrists, pulls up the left sleeve of Dean's sweatshirt to check for fresh cuts.

"Dean," Cas orders, voice made stern out of fear. Because Dean knows his silence, his utter malleability in Cas's hands, is terrifying him. "I need you to tell me what happened. I need to know whether or not you're hurt."

Dean opens his mouth, intending to say something, but he can't speak. He tries again, but it's just two formless breaths of air.

He needs Cas to not touch him. Because he can still feel that guy's hands all over his body. Taste his fingers in his mouth.

He hasn't thought about that night in literally years. Not since Lee – but after a couple shots of whiskey, Dean could always just shove it back down again. Not since Alastair dredged it up along with all the other shit in Dean's life. Not since Claire and the douchewad Randy. And Dean could hear Claire screaming in the bedroom upstairs, didn't need to see her torn sleeve to know what had happened.

But now Cas is *right there*, pawing at Dean and so close Dean can smell him. Cas smells like Cas always does: a little musty. A little like Dean's deodorant because he always forgets to buy his own. Like toothpaste. Like coffee. Too much.

"Can't," Dean chokes out. "I can't."

"You can't what, Dean?" Cas says.

I can't. With you. I can't. I can't let you touch me. I can't.

"I'm sorry," Dean says. And his left hand catches tight around Cas's wrist, pulls him blindly forward until Dean can bury his face in Cas's chest, almost in his armpit, eyes still shut, just breathe. Just breathe.

"Don't apologize, Dean," Cas says.

Don't touch me. Don't fucking touch me. Dean thinks and trembles against Cas's body. *Please, don't let go*.

"Okay," Cas says. He still sounds panicked and confused, but he relaxes slightly. "Okay, Dean." He awkwardly winds an arm around

Dean's back, tugs Dean closer, eases the two of them into a more comfortable position against the wall.

"I'm here," he says, and drops his face into Dean's hair. "I'm here."

"I – I can't," Dean whispers. Or at least he thinks he says it out loud.

"You don't have to do anything, Dean," Cas says gently.

"I can't," Dean stammers into Cas's chest. "With you – I can't." And Cas goes very still, stops rubbing his hand up and down Dean's back. *But I want to. Please, Cas, don't leave me. Because I want to.*

"Dean," Cas says, still not moving. "I can tell you're praying to me, but I can't hear you. I'm sorry."

Dean sucks in a long, deep breath. Lets it out slowly. He can't see anything because his eyes are still closed, but he can feel Cas's hand on his back, feel the slight itch of his cast on his right arm, feel Cas's breath in his hair, feel the hair on Cas's wrist under Dean's fingers. And he can hear Cas's heartbeat. He can hear the steady plink of the sink faucet. He can hear his own breath, in and out. He can smell the Clorox bleach they use to clean the floors. And he can smell his own bed clinging to Cas's sweatshirt. He must have bitten his lip, because he can taste blood in his mouth.

"I c-can't," Dean says again, helplessly, not even sure what he's trying to say anymore. "I don't know how to do this."

"Dean," says Cas carefully. He starts rubbing Dean's back again, very slowly, barely brushing Dean with his palm. And Dean wants him to stop and doesn't want him to stop all at once. It hurts, the warring desires inside his head. It's like the hellhound is ripping him to shreds again. He still can't open his eyes. "I want you to know that I love you."

Dean's breath hitches. He tries not to whimper; he's not sure he succeeds. *I love you. I love all of you*, Cas said before he started spitting up black tar.

Cas keeps talking, just a gentle murmur right above Dean's head. "I love you, Dean," he says. "But if this is not something you're comfortable with…I just love you. And I would be glad to love you in any way you want me to."

It's too big. It's too much. Dean can't make that kind of choice. It isn't

fair of Cas to put that on Dean because *I love you. I love you.* It's all Dean can hear. He doesn't know what to do with it.

"Cas, I –" Dean swallows, and he can still taste bile in his mouth from when he got sick. He feels so incredibly week, and he knows there's no way he can possibly get back to his bed on his own.

I love you to. I want you. I don't deserve you. You don't know what that means. And I can't –

"Would you like to get up?" Cas asks. "I don't think the floor is the most comfortable place to stay."

Dean sucks in a slow, stuttering breath. Leans into Cas's warm, firm body, because there's nothing left in his own. He puts his ear against Cas's chest; he can hear Cas's heart beating, feel it pulsing in tandem along with Dean's. And he nods.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three months before

It's not that Dean wakes up, just that suddenly he is awake, and then he can't quite remember a time when he wasn't awake to begin with.

He is standing in an expanse of white light. Funny, Cas described the Empty as black.

"Dean Winchester," Billie says from behind him. The heels of her leather boots click and echo against something, but Dean isn't exactly standing on anything. At least – it seems solid, except that it's not. If he's somehow ended up in the motherfucking clouds, he swears – "This is getting to be a habit, isn't it?"

"So, I'm dead, that it?" Dean says.

"Are you really surprised?" Billie shrugs. Dean will always maintain that Billie is an absolute bitch, but he can't deny that she's got style. A real gravitas. Maybe it comes with the job description. "You were just in the middle of the death throws of the two greatest celestial beings any world has ever known. It makes sense there would be a bit of collateral damage."

It's difficult for Dean to swallow. "And Sammy –"

"Do I really have to answer?" Billie says. She even has the grace to look sorry. Which makes Dean want to throw a brick at her head.

"So, where the fuck am I, anyway?" Dean demands, because he's afraid he might stop breathing if he doesn't keep talking. And then he thinks about whether he needs to keep breathing at all, seeing as he's dead.

Billie looks unimpressed by Dean's tone of voice, but she answers him anyway, "Heaven."

"This doesn't look like any heaven I've ever been to," Dean snaps.

"We – the souls and angels – are reconfiguring," Billie answers. She

smiles wryly. “It shook things up a bit, the whole killing God thing. But not to worry, Michael has it well in hand.”

“Michael’s in charge now?” Dean says, and he can’t say he’s displeased. Turned out he wasn’t such a douche, after all.

“He was certainly the next in line of command,” Billie says. “The angels immediately looked to him for leadership. And your half-brother insisted he take the job.”

“So is Adam up here, too?” Dean asks.

“No,” Billie says. “Michael’s Grace was enough to protect him. He removed his vessel outside of the blast radius.”

“Handy,” Dean scoffs. And he doesn’t mean to sound bitter, because if anyone’s deserved a happy ending, then it’s Adam fucking Milligan.

“Michael’s sorry, you know,” Billie says. “He feels he is partially responsible for the – well, he called it – the *bullshit* you and your brother were put through.”

“Yeah, well,” Dean shrugs. He doesn’t really want to hear it. He’s busy thinking about other things, now. Like the fact this is Heaven and he and Sam weren’t supposed to end up in Heaven. They’d pissed off Death so badly they’d earned themselves a one-way ticket to the Empty. And, truthfully, Dean’d kinda been looking forward to it. “That was Chuck’s fault, wasn’t it? If he wants to blame someone, blame that douchewad, not himself.”

Billie nearly smiles. “Nonetheless,” she says. “He wants to give you a gift. He says, in the midst of the Heaven’s reconstruction, small details will be easily ignored.”

“I don’t –” Dean doesn’t know exactly what he’s going to say. *I don’t know* or *I don’t give a damn* or *I want to see my brother. Or Cas*. “What about your library. All the different endings –”

“There’s nothing written,” Billie says. “Not anymore.” And then she fixes Dean with a stern gaze. “So, what is it you want, Dean?”

Dean thinks about all of them: Sam and Cas and Eileen and he can’t help but think of Jack, too, and Adam, now that he’s back.

Finally, he says, “I just want them to be happy.”

Billie raises her eyebrows. Dean suddenly knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that, wherever it is he ends up next, he won't remember any of this. "Whatever you say." And she lifts her scythe.

OOO

Present day

"Is that how you found me? You know…in the hotel," Dean asks. They're in bed again, but Dean's better. Calmer. Cas insisted he drink some tea, which was really gross, but it settled his stomach, and then he slept for a while. Cas woke him up for lunch, which he's so far managed to keep down.

And Cas isn't touching him. Not really. He's just sitting up against the headboard while Dean's curled on his side, with his nose a few inches from Cas's thigh, so he could sort of nuzzle into him if he wanted to, but right now Dean's okay with that just being an option.

He – later. If Cas wants to touch him later, like run his hands through his hair, or rub his shoulder – Dean thinks he could handle that. But right now, it's okay to just be in bed together.

"Because you could sense me praying or whatever?" Dean clarifies.

"Yes," Cas answers. "I couldn't hear what you were saying, but I knew you were distressed. So, I made Sam look for you."

"Oh," Dean says. Maybe now is when he's supposed to say *thanks*. But he doesn't think he can. Not yet.

"Would you like me to hold your hand?" Cas says.

It's out of the blue, like a lot of things Cas says. And Dean tries not to shudder at the thought of fingers all over his body. Sliding into his mouth. Curling around his chin. But it's Cas. It's fucking Cas, and it's supposed to be okay.

"I already said you don't have to ask all the damn time," Dean snaps. He rolls onto his back, lays his cast across his stomach, stares at the ceiling. And he wants to put his left hand by his hip, so it'd be too awkward for Cas to reach out and grab it, but instead he keeps it by his head. Because Cas wants to hold his hand – and Dean – Dean's a grown ass man and he can handle a little handholding – it shouldn't make him erupt into gooseflesh. Shouldn't make him want to curl up into a ball and hide.

“It’s alright for you to say no to me, Dean,” Cas says, and he sounds almost frustrated. So shit. Dammit. Dean should have just said yes. And Cas doesn’t take Dean’s hand.

And, now that he’s said it, now that the words are just hanging there over their heads, Dean wishes Cas had. Instead, Dean curls his hand into a fist, fights the urge to bring it to his mouth so he can bite down on his knuckles.

“You know,” Dean says. His voice is high and strange. Not his voice. But he doesn’t want to sit in silence right now, not with Cas looking at him all disappointed because Dean can’t just be a normal frikken person for once. “I was thinking more about the cars. I could probably find some good buyers. Could probably work it into some sort of business. I always wanted to be a mechanic. I could work right out of the garage. Wouldn’t have to worry about brown-bagging it, or anything.”

“Dean,” Cas says quietly. Dean shuts up. He swallows. Keeps staring at the ceiling.

Beside him, Cas shifts. He inches down from the headboard, turns on his side so he’s facing Dean. And Dean wants to turn back over. Wants to hide his face in Cas’s shoulder. Wants Cas to stop looking at him.

“Why did you kiss me last night?” Cas asks.

Dean’s stomach plummets. The turkey sandwich and handful of potato chips he ate a half hour ago turn over.

“I –” Dean says to the ceiling. Swallows. Shuts his eyes. Sees blood on a bathroom floor. “Cas, I –”

“I understand it might be difficult to tell me,” Cas says slowly. Quietly. Face just inches from Dean’s ears. If Dean turned his head right now, he could kiss Cas again. Make him shut up. “And please know you don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to. Or if you feel like you can’t. But it might help if you did tell someone. And I – I wouldn’t mind knowing, Dean. Please know that nothing you ever say to me could shock me. Or hurt me. Not if it’s clearly causing you so much pain.”

Dean just swallows air for a little while. Cast rising and falling on his belly. And Cas lets him. Just lies there silently waiting for an answer. And Dean’s talked to Cas before. Dean’s told Cas things he’s never even told Sammy. Dean’s told Cas things that no one else knows.

But Dean's never told anyone – he doesn't know how – he doesn't understand why it's so hard.

I didn't want you to leave, Dean tries thinking it. Enunciates the words clearly in his mind. Tries opening his mouth, just lets them breathe out.

"I didn't want you to leave." He half-way hopes Cas can't hear him.

"By kissing me you thought you could persuade me to stay?" Cas says, like he's parsing out some complex mathematical equation.

"I knew you wanted –" Dean stops. Because he wanted it. Why is it so Goddamn hard to admit he wanted it? "And I thought it was the only way to get you to stay."

He might as well fish a knife out of his duffle bag and burry it into Cas's stomach.

"Thank you for telling me," Cas says. And the understanding in his voice makes Dean want to scream because it's the wrong kind of understanding. Because Cas doesn't get it – he doesn't – and now he's going to be all noble and –

"You don't need to…engage with me romantically to make me stay with you, Dean," Cas says. "You're my best friend and my family. That's all I need from you. In fact, it's more than enough."

Dean shuts his eyes. It's too much again. It's building *again*. And his heart thuds so hard against his ribs it hurts.

"I want –" Dean says, but his voice cuts out on a squeak because his throat seals up, so completely it's like someone's hand closes around his larynx. Dean struggles to take a deep breath. Cas just watches him, clearly not willing to touch him now.

And the idea of not being touched by Cas. Of never being touched by Cas again, smothers Dean with a grief so great he can't help but gulp out a dry sob. He moves before he can stop himself, just curls back onto his side, stuffs his face into the crook of Cas's neck. He tucks his knees up to his stomach in a pathetic need to be small, to be covered by Cas's body.

"Dean –" Cas says in surprise, maybe reproach, certainly confusion because Dean knows he's not exactly giving him clear signals, right now. But Dean can't help it, so he curls in deep, presses into Cas until

Cas gets the point and spreads his arm over Dean's back, holds him close.

"Cas, I – I need –" Dean says tremulously, breathes in Cas's shirt. Just breathes. Feels Cas's chest against his.

"I'll do my best to give you what you need, Dean," Cas says. He holds Dean tightly. He doesn't ask any more questions for a while, and Dean waits until his heart stops trying to burst out of his chest. He does his best to remind himself that Cas is there. That Cas might actually want to be there. That Cas might actually want to stay, and Dean doesn't need to worry that he's going to leave – not right now, at least.

"I think I killed a guy once," Dean starts, voice muffled because he's talking into Cas's chest.

"Who?" Cas says. Because Dean's stupid, and he's killed a helluva lot of guys.

But Cas asked. And Cas told him he could talk, if he wanted to, that Cas would listen. And at this point, Dean's already bared his soul more than once to Cas, already bled and wept and thrown up in front of the guy, so at this point there's not much else that Cas might be surprised by – and he said he wouldn't be. Wouldn't be shocked. Wouldn't be hurt. Wouldn't leave.

"I was nineteen," Dean continues. "I – uh. I used to turn tricks." Dean swallows. He remembers every Goddamn bathroom floor. Every dark alley. "Just – I used to suck dick for money. Because we needed – Dad would be gone longer than he thought or –"

It wasn't Dad's fault, Dean smothers the absurd need to defend his father, because he's not screwed up enough not understand that what Dad did to them was messed up. That he shouldn't have put everything on Dean. That he should have at least left them enough money.

But it's not like Dad made Dean get down on his knees; it was just the easiest option. And sometimes Dean fucking liked it. When a guy was gentle enough. Maybe patted Dean on the head like he'd done a good job. Sometimes Dean jacked himself off in the shower to the memory of it.

Cas is rubbing Dean's back. It feels nice. A steady, slow rhythm. Dean keeps going. "There was a guy once who wanted more. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so he tried – and – and I almost killed him. I

might have killed him. I don't know. I stole his wallet and ran. I didn't leave the hotel for the next week because I was scared shitless the police would show up, and – and Dad already proved he didn't care if I rotted in jail. And that was only stealing. Murder would've been… yeah."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Cas says quietly. Quietly enough that Dean can just pretend he didn't hear him.

"The cops never showed," he says. "So maybe that means the guy didn't die. And he didn't press charges."

"Is that why you find it uncomfortable," Cas starts, obviously unsure of what words to use, "the idea of being with a male?"

Dean sucks in a deep breath. "There's…um," he says. "There's other stuff. Other stuff that fucked me up."

Because the problem is, intellectually, Dean *knows*. He *knows* there's something wrong with him and he knows why.

He knows that fucking his twelfth-grade social studies teacher made him understand that sex was a tool. That he wouldn't give it away for free again. Because sex was a transaction. Ms. Davis traded pretty lies about his essays, told him she'd help him apply for college, said his dreams mattered, convinced him that with a good enough education he could make enough money to get away with Sammy, just if he wouldn't move, wouldn't make a sound –

And that's when everything else started, too. Because Dean can bullshit himself all he wants about waiting until he was eighteen, about waiting until he was at least old enough not to get turned out of bars, but the truth is, he'd thought about it before. It's be so fucking easy. He knew he was pretty enough for it. He already knew how to turn heads. But it took her to teach him that sex was just sex, that a blowjob didn't matter as long as it earned him a buck.

And feeling good didn't matter. Because his own pleasure isn't what kept SpaghettiOs on the table. And his own pleasure certainly didn't interest Dad.

Because Dad didn't hit him. He didn't.

Nearly took off his head with a beer bottle, but that was when Sam hightailed it for Flagstaff on Dean's watch, and Dean deserved the flecks of glass in his hair as the bottle missed his face by an inch and

shattered on the wall behind him. But Dad didn't hit him.

But out of the few times he did, twice it was because Dad found Dean with a guy. And Dean's not stupid enough to think Dad's not rolling over in his grave at the thought of his son curled into a ball in some ex-angel's arms right now. Because Dean knows Dad didn't slap him because Dean said I hate you on the streets of New York. Knows Dad didn't actually give a shit about he and Lee being drunk.

"Your father didn't know," Cas says. It isn't exactly a question. And there's something in Cas's voice, something deep that makes Dean shiver, makes him suddenly very glad that Cas never met John Winchester.

"No," Dean says into Cas's shirt. "Neither did – I don't know if Sam's ever guessed." He hopes not. God, he hopes not. He doesn't think he could deal with Sam's ridiculous guilt, all the should-haves or shouldn't-haves because, fact is, it happened. And there's nothing Dean or Sam can do about it.

"Did your father know about your sexuality?" Cas asks. "I understand people can often feel…repressed if they aren't supported by family members."

Dean huffs a laugh, but it turns into a weird, strangled sound that gets caught in his throat, and Cas tightens his grip around his back. So maybe, yeah, maybe he can't laugh about that quite yet.

"That – that hunt in Texhoma," Dean starts. "When Sam was hurt –" *and we weren't talking,* Dean doesn't add, "I met up with Lee Webb. A hunter I knew when Sam was at Stanford. For a while we, ah – I'd let him fuck me."

"The man who captured the Marid?" Cas says.

Dean nods, because Cas might have easily said *the man you killed?*

"Dad walked in on us once," Dean says. His chest hurts. He remembers the flush of his cheeks. The shame building in his throat as he fumbled to put his boxers back on, as Lee grabbed for the comforter and cursed, face cherry red, but grinning stupidly because they were both drunk, and –

"And he, um," Dean doesn't know how to say it – doesn't know how to say *backhanded me so hard he drew blood where his wedding ring broke skin.*

Cas presses a little harder for a second between his shoulder blades. Dean breathes. Just breathes.

“Did your father hit you often?” Cas says.

Dean’s eyes sting. There’s a lump in his throat. He shakes his head against Cas’s shoulder.

“Just when I – really messed up,” Dean says in a strangled voice.

“I’m sorry,” Cas says softly.

“And I –” Dean keeps talking, even though it doesn’t sound like his voice again. It’s too high and breathy. “Sometimes I can’t be touched. Sometimes I – it never used to be this bad. But I just can’t – but I want –”

“Dean, I never want to touch you if you don’t want me to,” Cas says earnestly.

“B-but I want you to,” *all the Goddamn time.* “I don’t – I-I didn’t just kiss you because I thought you – I – I,” *I wanted it. I wanted it so bad,* but Dean still can’t fucking say it, and he just gasps in frustration, open mouthed against Cas’s shirt, because he can’t –

“Is this alright now?” Cas asks after a pause, during which he was clearly trying to figure out what Dean was saying, because Dean can’t give him a straight answer. “Just holding you like this?”

Dean nods immediately. “Y-yes,” he says, even pulls his face away a little from Cas’s chest so he can make sure Cas knows he’s telling the truth.

“Okay, then,” Cas says, he curls his other arm, the one pinned under Dean’s body, around Dean’s neck, presses his palm gently against the back of Dean’s head, and leads Dean’s face back into his chest. “Then this is a good place to start.”

OOO

Dean wakes early enough that Cas doesn’t have to remind him to take his meds. And then he sort of just rolls over into where Cas is lying beside him, just tries not to think too hard about it, and he kind of head butts into Cas’s personal space, lifts a leg so he can loop it over where both Cas’s legs are crooked because he sleeps in a fetal position. And then Dean nudges Cas’s right arm, not-quite wiggles his shoulder

under it, and wraps his own arm around Cas's waist.

And he does it all without freaking out, although he works hard not to breathe too loudly, tries to keep his heartbeat steady, and tries not to think about Cas waking up – Cas blinking his eyes open and being shocked and disgusted to find Dean so close – tell him that he obviously misinterpreted because of course –

No. Fucking no. Shut up.

Dean can see the stubble on Cas's jaw. He can see the slightly chapped skin of his lips. He can see his eyelashes, his mussed hair, the perfect curl of the shell of his ear. Dean can feel the soft cotton of Cas's t-shirt under his fingers. He can feel Cas's warm breath on his face. Dean can feel his bare toes curled in the sheets on the bed. Dean can feel the prickle of the too-long growth of his beard on his chin and neck. Dean can hear Cas breathing. Dean can hear his own heartbeat. He can hear the faint creak of the mattress as Dean adjusts himself so he's not lying on his broken arm. He can still smell Cas: musty deodorant and a little morning breath.

"Mmmh," Cas hums, sleepy and comfortable, and Dean takes a deep breath. It's okay. This is okay. Then Cas's eyelids flicker. His eyes are bleary with sleep. "You are very warm," Cas murmurs.

Dean lets out his breath slowly. Goes for a smile. Nearly makes it.

"I like it," Cas says, and burrows in closer to Dean. And something warm and soft pulses in Dean's stomach. And this is okay. Dean can handle this.

"Cas?" He whispers, not quite trusting his voice, and not quite sure he wants Cas to hear him.

"Dean?" Cas answers, cracking open his eyes again, but not looking particularly worried, which is good, because Dean really wants to carry off this morning without adding anymore to Cas's worries.

"Can you, uh," he says. *Kiss me*. He breathes. It's okay. "Can you kiss me?" he asks, voice just a little hoarse.

Cas blinks open his eyes. His eyes are beautiful. Just pools of deep blue. Dean doesn't do poetic shit, but damn, Cas's eyes are blue enough to write poetry about. Cas's lips quirk into one of those closed-lip smiles he does.

“If you want me to, yes,” Cas says softly.

“Yes,” Dean breathes. Cas ducks his face toward Dean’s, and Dean brings his up to meet in the middle. Their lips touch, gentle and soft. Dean opens his lips slightly, just enough to take Cas’s lower lip into his mouth, trace the outline of Cas’s lips with his tongue. Dean can feel Cas smiling into the kiss, which makes him smile, too.

They pull away after a moment. Dean meets Cas’s eyes, can’t help feeling a little sheepish, but Cas’s eyes are warm, latching ahold of Dean’s face so intently Dean has to look away. He ducks back into Cas’s chest, puts his nose against Cas’s neck. Cas drops a kiss to Dean’s forehead, and Dean closes his eyes against the feeling of Cas’s whiskery chin rubbing against his brow.

“Was that alright?” Cas asks.

Dean sniffs a half-laugh, because Cas is ridiculous. Dean’s ridiculous. But he likes that Cas asked, anyway. “Completely alright,” he says, shifts his head so he can whisper his lips against Cas’s clavicle, and it really does, this morning, feel like it’s alright.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you thank you thank you for every comment, bookmark, and kudo. Supernatural is a great fandom – I am so infinitely grateful I found it.

Sequel (“surely heaven waits”) is in the works! It's seven chapters long. I'll likely start posting in April, so make sure you subscribe to me as an author if you'd like to be kept updated.

Also, I did the tumblr thing. If you wanna reblog this story, you can find it here: carry on

End Notes

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1800-273-8255
Crisis Text Line: 741-741

You are loved and so worthy of that love. It is okay to need help and to ask for help. Please reach out to someone. You are not alone, and life can get better.

Find me on Tumblr where I psychoanalyze the boys, dissect incredibly minute details about the show, post bits and pieces about my fic, and look for friends: foolondahill17

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!